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CALLING YOU™

OTSU-ICHI



CALLING YOU

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OTSU-ICHI

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FICTION



STORY Otsu-ichi
ILLUSTRATIONS Miyako Hasami
TRANSLATION Agnes Yoshida
ENGLISH ADAPTATION Django Wexler
DESIGN AND LAYOUT Jennifer Carbajal
COVER DESIGN Jose Macasocol, Jr.

EDITOR Kara Allison Stambach
DIGITAL IMAGING MANAGER Chris Buford
PRE-PRESS SUPERVISOR Erika Terriquez
PRODUCTION MANAGER Elizabeth Brizzi
MANAGING EDITOR Vy Nguyen
VP OF PRODUCTION Ron Klamer
PUBLISHER Mike Kiley
PRESIDENT AND C.O.O. John Parker
C.E.O. & CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER Stuart Levy

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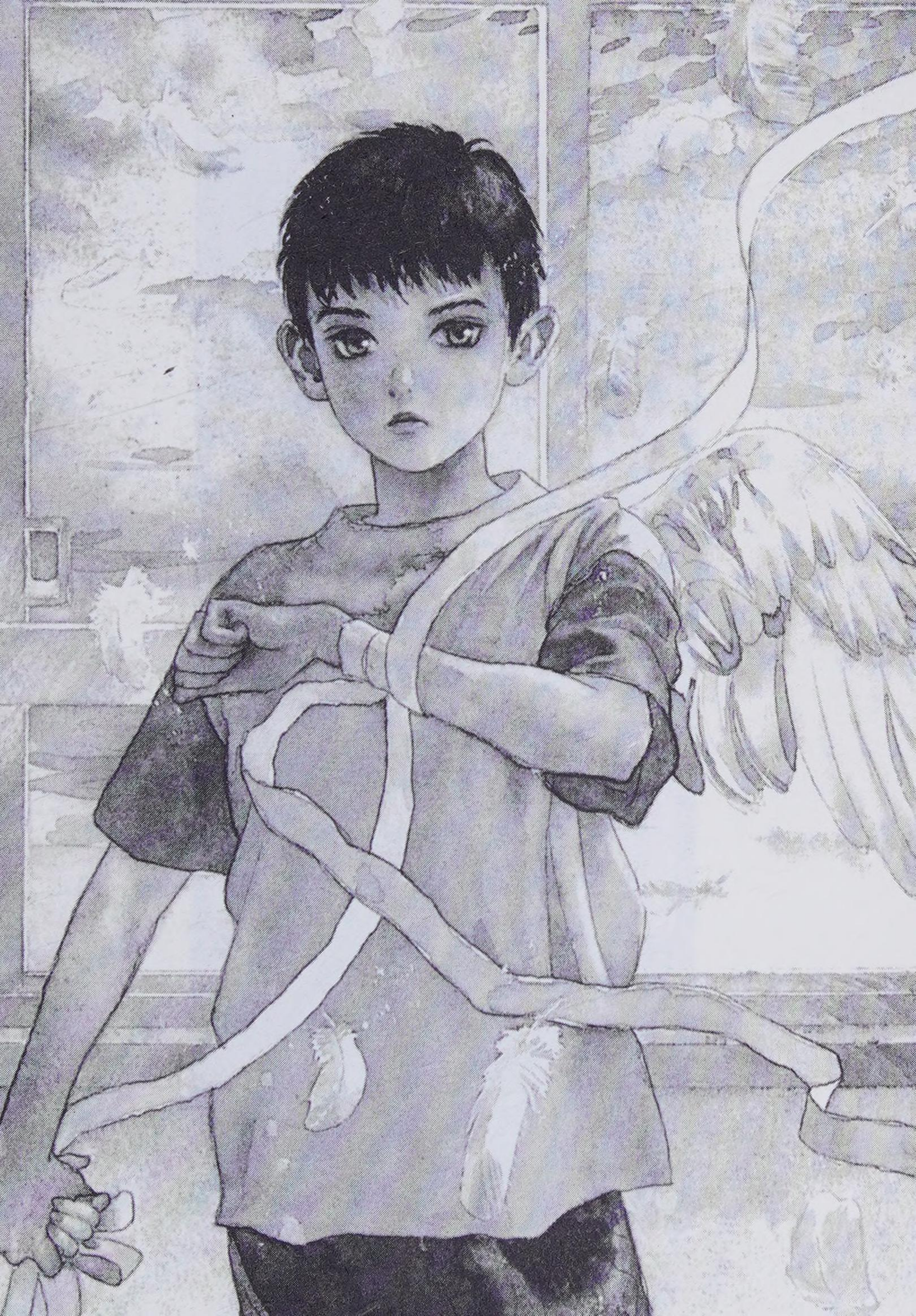
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CALLING YOU



ONE

I'm probably the only girl on campus without a cell phone.

I don't sing karaoke, either. I've never gotten one of those sticker pictures with my friends, because I don't *have* any friends. I'm a freak and everyone knows it, especially me.

Everyone has a cell phone, even though they're technically against the rules. It's a constant reminder of how alone I am; every time I hear a fancy ringtone during class, I feel left behind. The other kids are all connected by a vast spider web of shiny little toys, and I'm not a part of any of it.

It's not as if I couldn't buy a cell phone, because I could. I just know that no one would call me, so what's

the point? I'm not really good at talking to people anyway. When someone tries to strike up a conversation, I simply smile and nod until they go away. I'm so worried that I'm going to say something stupid, I'd just rather not say anything at all. Aside from not knowing what to say, I can't even decipher if what they're saying is actually the truth.

I can't tell if people mean what they say. I can't tell if they're telling a joke. I can't tell if they are being sarcastic or playful. Basically, any or all nuance in the realm of communication is completely lost on me. I'm a conversational lost cause.

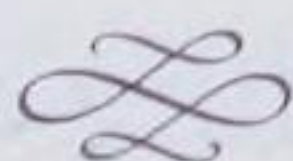
Once, in grade school, a girl told me she liked my haircut. The compliment made me so happy that I kept the same style for two years. It wasn't until middle school, when I heard her making fun of me to her friends, that I realized she'd just been acting polite. I felt so stupid. After a few more incidents like that, I started to shake and sweat every time someone talked to me. Eventually, I just stopped talking to people altogether. It seemed like the path of least resistance.

I started high school this spring, but it's just more of the same. I'm still the silent, forgotten kid in the corner of the classroom, glued to my desk like some bizarre fungal growth. Breaks are the worst—everyone gathers

in their tight little cliques while I sit alone, waiting for class to start up again. The more people laugh, the worse I feel. Sometimes I wish everyone could just be miserable like me.

The fact that I don't have a cell phone bothers me more than it should. It's irrefutable proof that I'm truly, completely, and desperately alone. It makes me feel like I'm some kind of medical misfit who's missing the make-new-friends gene. I know that I don't function properly, and on top of everything else I feel guilty about it. Like it's my fault somehow that I haven't been able to make friends.

I pretend that I couldn't care less, but even after all these years it still hurts. Every time I see one of my classmates with a cute phone decorated with sticker pictures, I get so jealous. I know she probably has lots of friends—so many that she can't fit all their numbers into her phone's memory. I want to be like her so badly I could cry.



I usually go to the library during lunch. I stick out like a sore thumb in the classroom, but the library is quiet and empty, and I can spend my precious half hour between

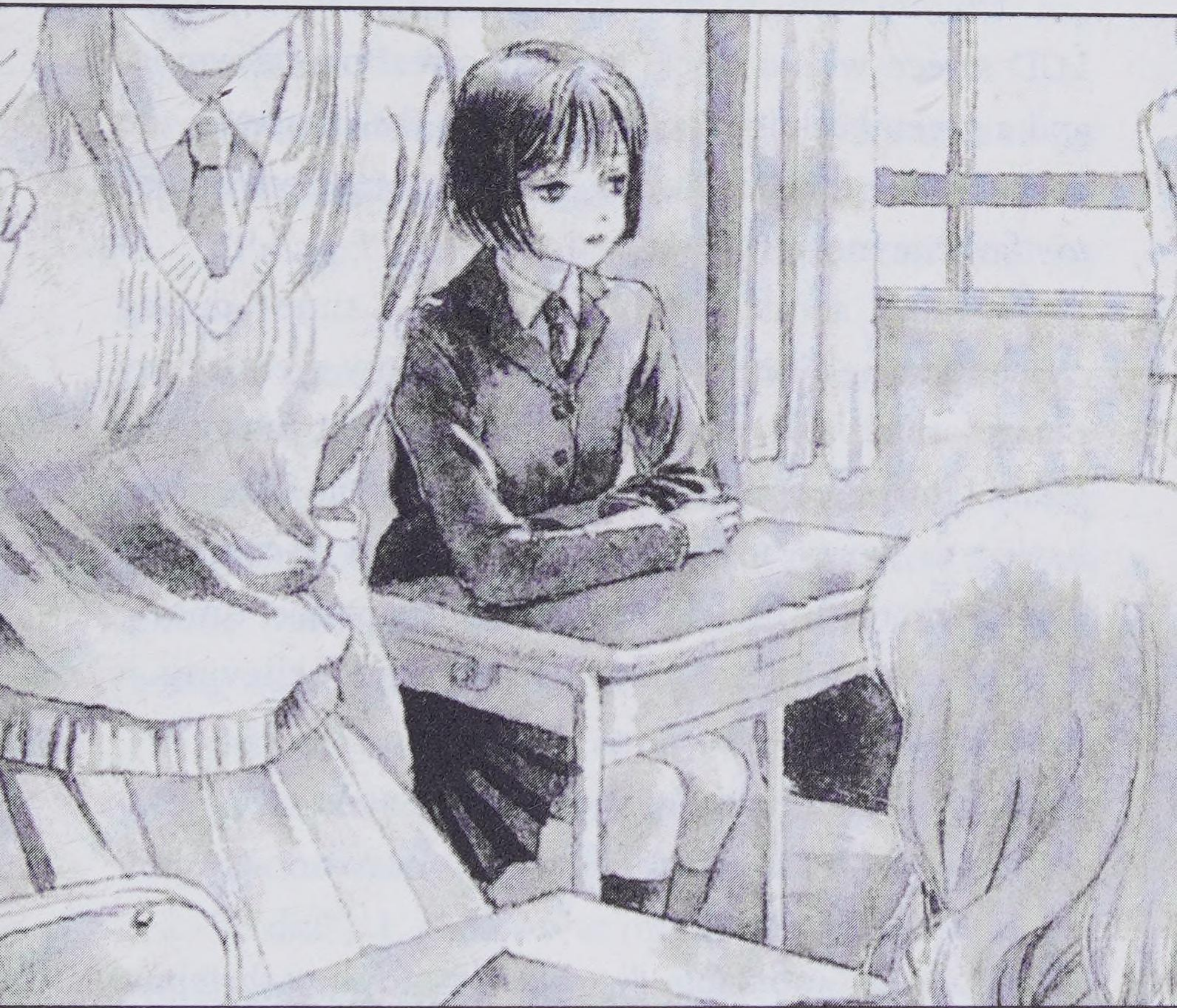
classes either sleeping or re-reading one of my favorite books. In the winter I'm prone to colds, so I pick a seat by the heater . . . away from anyone who might come in.

When I close my eyes, I like to think about my cell phone. It's pure white, almost like porcelain, and it fits my hand perfectly when I pick it up. Not that I can actually pick it up, of course, but I can picture it precisely. I've imagined it so often that it feels like it's with me all the time. Even though I can't see it with my eyes open, it feels like it's always just outside my field of vision. Physical. Real.

I'm usually the first person to leave school at the end of the day. It's not that I walk fast or have somewhere to rush off to or anything, but I'm not in any clubs, and I don't have anyone to hang out with, so there's nothing to keep me there after classes are over. I walk home alone—my hands resting in my pockets and my focus never leaving the ground.

On the way, I sometimes stop by the electronics store and pick up a few cell phone pamphlets to look over on the bus. I like reading about the new features so I can add them to my imaginary phone. It makes the bus ride pleasant.

There's never anyone waiting for me when I get home. My parents work late and I'm an only child, so

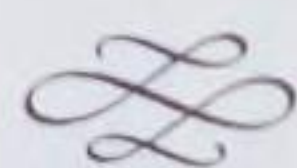


I'm alone in the house. Most of the time I sit in my room and build my cell phone in my head, like I do in the library. I've been doing it for so long it feels almost real, like I could reach out and touch it.

Do you want to hear what it looks like? It has an LCD screen with a clock, just like a real phone would, and a green backlight so you can see the display in the dark. My ringtone is "Calling You"—a song from one of my favorite movies, *Baghdad Café*.

I think about my phone all the time—during classes, during dinner, whenever I close my eyes. It's my phone—mine and only mine. That thought makes me giddy. I imagine running my fingers across its face, never having to worry about getting it dirty or keeping the battery charged. The clock always keeps perfect time.

After a while, I had a hard time believing it *wasn't* real.



One January morning, I woke up to my shrieking alarm clock, feeling groggy and cold. I rolled out of bed, still half dreaming, and started collecting my things for school on instinct.

Where's my cell phone?

"Breakfast is ready!" Mom shouted from downstairs.

I was busy turning my room upside down. I hunted for the phone around my bed, tossing books out of the way, making a huge mess, but I couldn't find it anywhere.

I heard footsteps on the stairs. "Ryo, it's time to get up," Mom said. "Are you awake?"

"I'm up," I said. "Hold on a second, I can't find my phone."

My mom looked puzzled. "I didn't know you had a cell phone."

It was like someone had splashed cold water on my face. *What am I doing?* Somehow I'd forgotten that my phone wasn't real. *Great. There must really be something wrong with me now.*

School was the same as always. When I got home, Mom was already there for once. "Hi, Ryo. I think you forgot your watch today. Did you make the bus okay?"

"I did?" I glanced at my wrist and found my watch missing from its usual place. "I guess I did. No problems, though."

That was true. I hadn't even noticed.

I had known what time it was. How's that possible if I wasn't wearing my watch? It took me a moment to realize

that I'd been using my cell phone—my *imaginary* cell phone—and checking the clock on its LCD.

That doesn't make any sense. How could it display the correct time? I imagined the phone's clock and saw it set at 8:20 PM. When I looked up, the clock on the wall had ticked to that exact time.

I felt my heart beat faster. I flicked the imaginary phone with my finger, and my nail hit the plastic with a tiny *click*.



On the bus home from school the next day, someone's phone rang. It sounded like an alarm was going off. The boy sitting in front of me fumbled in his bag until he managed to make it stop, then took out his phone and started talking.

It was a cold day. The heaters had fogged up the windows, making the outside world invisible.

The only other passenger on the bus was a middle-aged woman saddled with a pair of shopping bags. She glared at the boy, annoyed, but he chattered on, totally oblivious.

I watched him with a mix of irritation and envy. People who talk on their cell phones in public places can

be very annoying, but at the same time, I couldn't help but wish I could do it, too.

After the boy hung up, the driver mumbled something over the PA about not using phones as a courtesy to the other passengers. I settled back against the window, nearly half asleep, courtesy of the warm air escaping from the vent. Just as I was drifting off, another phone rang.

At first, I thought it was the boy's, so I resolved to ignore it. After a moment, though, I realized the ringtone was different—not a harsh beeping alarm, but rather a familiar melody.

Baghdad Café's "Calling You." The same song I'd wanted for my phone. *That can't be a coincidence. Whose phone is it?*



I scanned the bus to try and find the owner, but it was just the four of us: the driver, the boy, the woman, and me. No one else moved. In fact, no one else seemed to notice the ringing at all.

They have to be able to hear it. It was loud enough that I could easily follow the tune. As I awkwardly scanned the area, an odd notion began to take shape. After a moment, I closed my eyes and peeked into my imagination.

The sleek white phone I had created was ringing.

TWO

T*hat's impossible.* My mouth went dry. *I must be going crazy.* The phone in my head was my refuge; even though the rest of the world had abandoned me and left me with nothing, my phone was entirely mine. Except, now, it wasn't.

I can't just let it ring forever. Nor could I throw it away, or stop thinking about it, just because I was a little scared. The imaginary cell phone had become such a big part of my life that it was more important to me than almost anything in the real world.

Heart fluttering, I imagined taking it in my hand and pressing the button to stop the ringing. "Um, hello?"

I spoke only in my mind, but the response on the other end of the nonexistent line was immediate.

“Wow!” said a young man’s voice. “Someone really picked up!”

Hearing another person’s voice in my head was a little disarming, so I quickly hung up. What else was I going to do, answer him?

Yeah, that’s a good idea, Ryo.

I opened my eyes and looked around the bus again, hoping it was someone playing a trick on me. But of course, no one was paying me the least bit of attention.

It’s finally happened. I’ve actually lost my mind.

The bus reached my stop. I showed my pass to the driver and stepped out into the bitter cold. Just as I got off, the music started again. I stumbled in surprise and nearly fell off the bus.

This time I didn’t immediately answer. The bus pulled away, leaving me behind. I took a deep breath, the freezing air hurting my lungs, and I tried to calm my speeding heart. I was scared, but too curious to just let it go unanswered. Once again I picked up the imaginary phone.

“Hello?”

“Please don’t hang up. I swear this isn’t a prank call.” It was the same voice.

For some reason, the idea of a prank call on an imaginary phone amused me.

I guess I have to get my kicks when and where I can.

There was a moment of silence. I felt like I had to make conversation; the whole situation was so bizarre that I forgot my usual anxiety about talking to people.

"I'm not sure what I should say," I said. "I'm talking into an imaginary phone."

"Me, too."

"I'm surprised you found my number. I didn't think there was an imaginary phone book."

"I was just trying random numbers," he said. "None of the others connected. I was about ready to give up, but then you answered."

"Sorry for hanging up on you the first time," I said.

"It's okay. I gave my phone redial."



It was a couple of blocks from the bus stop to my house. The sky was gray and gloomy—the street looked abandoned. Even the houses were dark and lifeless. The naked, skeletal trees swayed in the wind. I buried my face in my scarf and listened to the voice in my head.

The boy said his name was Shinya Nozaki. Like me, he spent much of his time picturing an imaginary cell phone; eventually his became so real that he tried making calls from it.

I shook my head. *Not only is there someone else who spends as much time thinking about a phone as I do, but somehow he can call me with it.* I wasn't sure which part was less believable.

"This is a lot to handle." I got to my house and dug into my pocket for the key. "Do you mind if I hang up for now?"

"Sure. Can I call again some time?"

"Of course."

As I hung up, it occurred to me that this was the first real conversation I'd had in a long time. After talking the whole way home, even if it was only in my head, the house felt as quiet as a graveyard. It had never bothered me before, but now for some reason the place felt hollow and lonely. I hurriedly flipped the living

room's lights on and then turned on the TV, just for the noise. Then I made myself some coffee.

I guess the question is: am I going crazy, or is Shinya a real person? It almost felt like the next logical step; having conjured up a cell phone, maybe I'd created someone to talk to. An alternate personality, like in the movies.

That has to be it. I have Multiple Personality Disorder. I'm so starved for human contact that I've finally gone insane. It was a shock to realize that despite the apathetic façade I'd created, I really did miss talking to people. No matter how much I pretended it didn't matter, the isolation eventually got to me.

And now I've got, what, an imaginary friend? I smiled uneasily. An imaginary friend to call on my imaginary phone.

I've got to find out for certain. Shinya's number hadn't showed up on the LCD, so I couldn't talk to him until he called back. But maybe I could call someone else.

I tried to call the police just to see if they would actually pick up from my imaginary cell phone. There was a moment of silence, and my heart beat a bit faster, but then a feminine voice said, "I'm sorry, but the number you have dialed is no longer in service . . ."

I tried the police, the fire department, the phone company—all the numbers that would always pick up in

real life. Each one gave the same result. Finally I started picking numbers at random, jamming the imaginary phone's end-call button as soon as I heard the woman's voice start again. *Whose voice is that, anyway?* I was on the verge of giving up when the line started to ring. Expecting to hear the recorded message again, I was caught off guard.

"Hello?" said another woman's voice.

I was so nervous that I got tongue-tied. "H-hello. Um. I'm s-sorry to call out of nowhere . . ."

"It's okay, I wasn't really doing anything . . . Who is this?"

"Ryo," I said.

"Ryo is a nice name," she said. "I'm Yumi." She paused. "You seem a little nervous."

"I'm calling on an imaginary phone," I explained.

"Of course you are. You've never done that before?"

"Never," I said, shocked. "I got a call from a boy named Shinya this afternoon. Before that, I didn't think I could talk to anyone with this phone. I mean . . . I'm still not sure . . ."

She laughed. "It takes some getting used to. Everything will be okay, though. Now, I bet you're thinking that it's all in your head, and Shinya and I are just figments of your imagination, right?"

"Y-yeah. Something like that." For a second I thought she'd read my mind.

"I thought the same thing, but it's not true. We're real." She explained how I could prove it to myself.

"Do I really have to do all that?" I said, once she was finished.

"There's an easier way, but I think you'll figure it out for yourself. Are you going to try that the next time he calls?"

I sighed. "Assuming he ever calls me again."

"I think he will."

She sounded confident. I spent a while longer talking to Yumi; she was so warm and friendly, it was hard not to like her. I found out that she was twenty, a college student, and lived alone. I told her a little bit about myself, and she taught me the important facts about the imaginary cell phones.

The phones in our minds weren't real, which meant that other people couldn't hear them ring or listen in on our conversations.

Most of the users, like me, had no idea what their own phone number was. As I'd surmised, there was no imaginary phonebook, and caller ID didn't work. The only way to reach someone else was by punching numbers at random.

Shinya must know my number, since he called me in the first place. I resolved to remember to ask him for it. Assuming he exists at all.

Yumi gave me one last important piece of information. "Here's the tricky part," she said. "Listen carefully. Sometimes, one end of the phone line is in a different time than the other end."

"A different *time*?"

"What's the date and time for you, right now?"

"January thirteenth, around six-thirty."

"For me it's the sixteenth," she said. "So I'm three days ahead of you."

"That's really strange. Is it different every time I make a call?"

"As far as I can tell, it's always the same between a given pair of people. So if you hang up and call me again in five minutes, it'll be five minutes later here, too."

"Do you know why it works that way?" I said.

"No idea. Maybe it's part of our phone numbers, somehow. Or maybe people are just different, so they imagine different phones."

"It's still strange," I said.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Anyway, Shinya might call you back soon, so let's get off the line. I'd love to talk to you again, though. All you have to do is press redial."

"Great. Thanks for everything!"

"No problem. Let me know how it goes!" She hung up.

I felt amazingly content. Yumi said she wanted to talk to me again and I felt like she truly meant it.

When Shinya called two hours later, I was much calmer than I had been the first time.

He cut right to the chase. "How do I know you're not just a figment of my imagination?" he said.

I guess everyone thinks that, at first. I made myself some coffee and told him what Yumi had said about the imaginary phones. As I did, I realized that what she'd said about it being all in our minds was absolutely true—



my mouth wasn't moving, and I didn't make a sound. Even if my parents had been home, they would have had no idea I was talking to anyone.

"What time is it right now, for you?" I asked.

"Seven. You?"

"Eight. So you're an hour earlier than I am." That was a lot shorter than my difference with Yumi. "Do you want to try an experiment?"

He agreed. A ten-minute bike ride took me to the convenience store. It was already after dark, but the white fluorescent light from inside made the shop seem to glow.

I was still on the phone with Shinya; after a couple of minutes, he made it to another convenience store somewhere near his house, an hour ago.

I stood in front of the magazine rack.

"Okay," I said. "*Weekly Shonen Sunday* came out today. Does your store have a copy?"

"Yeah."

"Do you usually read that?"

"Nope," he said.

"Me either. So neither one of us knows what's going to be in this week's issue, right?"

"Right."

"Okay. What's the title of the manga on page one forty-nine?"

I'd picked the number at random, without opening the magazine. This was the experiment Yumi had suggested—having Shinya look something up that I would have no way of knowing.

There was a pause as he flipped to the page. "Looks like *Mémories Off*, by Mitsuru Adachi."

My hands were shaking a little as I opened my own copy. *He's right*. I stared for a moment in silence. *He's real!*

"Well?" he said.

"Y-you're right, of course. Your turn."

"What's in the third frame on page three hundred thirty-five?" he asked.

I paged forward toward the end of the magazine until I found the spot. "It's a weird-looking guy saying . . . something really impolite." I blushed.

There was a pause as he searched for it. "Absolutely right." He sounded amazed. "You really do exist!"

I felt like laughing. While I kept my expression carefully calm, I could hear my chuckles echoing over the imaginary phone. *I guess it's harder to hide my emotions when I'm speaking in my own head.*

Shinya was laughing, too, from amazement and relief—I could tell. On a whim, I asked him for another line from the comic, and he ad-libbed in a silly voice that

made me laugh even harder. I did my best Evil Queen impression, and we went back and forth from there until we both started to have trouble keeping our composure in the real world.

After that night, I talked to Shinya all the time. At first he'd only call and talk for a little while, but as I got better at holding conversations in my head while paying attention to the outside world, we'd talk for hours at a time. His calls became the highlights of my day. During breaks at school, I'd sit and wait for that familiar melody while everyone else was chatting. When it finally rang, I would practically jump for the phone. I felt like a prisoner allowed outside the jail for the first time in her life.

Shinya was seventeen, a year older than me. His house was about three hours from mine by plane, or a bit longer by bus. Our similarities were amazing; I could talk with him about everything.

"I'm really kind of a shut-in," he said one day, while I was waiting for the bus.

"Me, too."

"You could have fooled me," he said, then laughed.

"It's the phone. Talking like this is so easy, I feel like I can tell you anything."

"I know what you mean," he said. "You're the first person I've talked to like this in years. Most days I go from morning 'til night without saying a single word."

"You sound like you're bragging," I said teasingly. "Is this an introvert contest?"

He laughed again. "It's not that. I'd just started to wonder if it would always be like this. Me, alone. Like being in the middle of a desert and waiting for someone to come my way." He paused. "I don't really expect you to understand that."

I was silent a moment. It was bitterly cold and my breath made white steam in the chilly January air. "I understand," I said eventually. "I really do."

After a while, we were connected more or less all the time. There was no bill for the phone service; at least, no one from the imaginary phone company ever came around to complain. I asked Yumi about that, the next time I talked to her, and she said she'd never had to worry about it.

I told Shinya everything about me, even the embarrassing stuff. The novels that I read, my constant battles with acne, even which toothpaste I use. I told him about my Totoro collection—I love all the Ghibli movies, but Totoro is my favorite, and I have at least thirty of them.

He told me personal stuff, too. Which games he liked to play when he was a kid, about the time he broke his arm, or how the picture on his scooter license looks nothing like him.

One day he told me about a dump he likes to go to. "Though it's really more of an empty lot. It sounds a little gross, but it's actually really peaceful. A lot of people just dump stuff there—old appliances, stuff that doesn't work anymore, and sometimes stuff that they just want to replace. I found a working widescreen TV the other day."

"Really?" I said. "Widescreen?"

"It's actually a regular TV, but it has a special function that distorts the picture to make everything look wider."

I laughed. "I think that's 'broken' and not 'widescreen.'"

We quickly hit on another good use for the imaginary phone: cheating on tests. Shinya had an English test he was worried about, so I sat at home with a dictionary and helped as much as I could. In exchange, he helped me pass my dreaded math exams. We weren't afraid of getting caught; anyone looking at either one of us wouldn't see anything strange, and no one could eavesdrop inside our heads.

When I got my first math test back—with the highest score I'd ever gotten—I bowed my head and thanked Shinya.

"Don't worry about it. It's nice to be able to help each other, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I could picture him smiling. I wondered if he'd go home tonight, or if he'd visit the dump again.

"Do me a favor?"

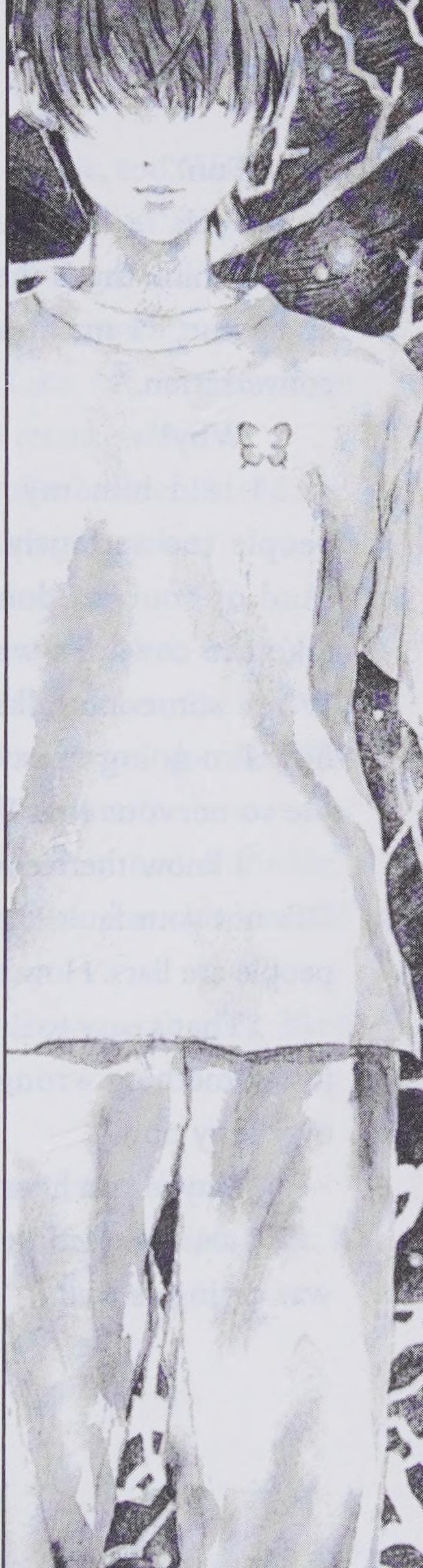
"Sure."

"Nexttime you're looking for appliances, see if you can find me a little cassette player. I've been looking for one."

He giggled. "I'll do my best. The dump doesn't take requests, though."

"That's okay. I can wait."

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I really like talking to you, you know. It's fun."



"Fun?"

"Yeah."

"I think that's the first time anyone's ever said that about me," I murmured. "Usually, I seem to kill any conversation."

"Why?"

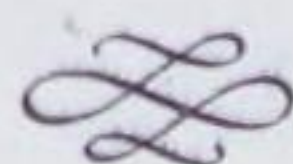
I told him my theory about how I take other people too seriously and end up being easy to fool. "And of course I don't like looking like an idiot, so I take the coward's way out and don't talk to anyone. When someone talks to me, all I can think about is how I'm going to say something stupid, and it makes me so nervous that I can't talk."

"I know the feeling," he said. His voice was gentle. "It's not your fault, though. You're just honest, and most people are liars. How can you be the one who's wrong?"

"That's easy to say," I countered. "But I think there's just something wrong with me, or I would have gotten over it by now."

"Maybe you have. You're talking to me, aren't you?"

I am. I smiled. It took me a while to realize that I was crying as well.



I talked to Yumi every once in a while, too. We weren't as close as I was with Shinya, but she was full of good advice. We talked about what college was like, and whether it was better to live alone or with roommates. Our hobbies were similar, too. Like me, she loved to read. I devoured every book she recommended.

"I feel like I've heard your voice before," I told her.

"Have you been on TV or something like that?"

"Me?" She laughed. "Of course not."

She was so together, so mature, that talking to her was a relief. The more I talked to her, the more I realized what a fundamentally nice person she was. She didn't seem to hate anyone at all, no matter how many mistakes they made or what flaws they had. I couldn't imagine her making fun of me. She was the kind of person I wished I could be someday.

"Yumi," I asked one day, "have you ever liked somebody?"

"Liked?"

"You know. *Liked*-liked." I was just curious.

"Oh." She paused for a moment, then said, "Yes. It was a while ago, though."

THREE

Shinya lived quite a ways away, but we'd gotten so close that I felt like he was always by my side. An advisor, a confidant—he was proof that I wasn't alone in the universe.

"I want to meet you," he said. "Face to face, in real life."

The idea had been creeping up on us gradually, during our usual conversations. I loved the imaginary phone, but it was still just a phone, not quite a substitute for talking in person. Even though our minds were connected, I wanted to see him.

It wasn't easy, of course. Shinya was a couple of hundred miles away. He had savings, though, that had built up over the years; enough for an airplane ticket. We

made our plans. I was going to go to the airport by bus and meet him. It was odd to think that I'd finally get to see what he looked like, and vice versa.

The day before his flight, we decided to talk on the real-world phone to go over the schedule. It was probably a silly gesture, paying a phone bill just to speak to him the same way I did every day, but it was also kind of fun. And embarrassing. It was the first time I'd talked to him without the time difference, outside the comfort of my own skull.

I got his phone number over the imaginary line and punched it in to the real-life phone in my living room. It was an odd feeling, after so long, to have an actual chunk of plastic pressed against my ear.

I kept the imaginary phone on while the real one rang, so I was still connected to the Shinya-of-one-hour-ago.

Click. "Hello? Ryo?" It was the same voice I'd heard so many times in my head.

"It's me. Hi!"

"Do me a favor," he said in a pained voice, "and tell the me from an hour ago to watch his step."

"What happened?"

"I was running to pick up the phone and I jammed my toe on the doorway."

I laughed as I relayed the message.

"Future-me is just clumsy," past-Shinya said, giggling. "Tell him he'd better have finished his physics project."

"This is getting ridiculous." As I turned my attention back to the real phone, I had a sudden insight. "So *this* is what Yumi was talking about."

"What is?" said present-Shinya.

"The easier way to prove to one another that we were real. All we had to do was talk to each other on the actual phone. We didn't have to do that whole complicated business at the store."

"Oh, that."

"You don't sound very surprised," I said.

"You told me about it an hour ago, over the imaginary phone."

I was getting a headache. I filled past-Shinya in and hung up both phones, real and imaginary, then hit redial to call Yumi.

"Hi, Ryo!" she said.

"Hello," I said. "I just figured out the 'easy' way of finding out whether Shinya is real. Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?"

"That would have been *too* easy," she said, and paused. "Good luck tomorrow."



The bus, of course, got stuck in traffic.

It was full of passengers heading for the airport, so I had to share a seat. The girl next to me wore a purple coat. She looked like she was about my age. She seemed somehow more mature, though, with her pretty makeup and a cute bag in her lap.

I wonder if I'll ever look like that. I sighed and connected to Shinya on the imaginary phone. Shinya-of-an-hour-ago was about to board the plane, which meant that present-Shinya was already in the air and staring down at the clouds.

"It's freezing," he said.

"The news said that today is the coldest day in a couple of years," I informed him. I rested my head against the window, feeling a little sleepy under the warm air from the heaters. The girl next to me couldn't hear our conversation, of course, so to her it looked like I was just staring out the window. The clouds were low and dark, and the whole city looked gray.

"We were supposed to be at the airport by now," I explained, "but the bus is stuck in traffic . . . How about you?"

"No traffic up here. No red lights, either. We're due in at twelve-twenty." He paused. "It's ten-twenty now, so with the hour time difference, it's eleven-twenty for you, right? I should be there in an hour."

"I'm not sure the bus will make it in time," I said.

"If I can't find you, I'll head down to the bus stop."

"It's right in front of the airport. Ask someone if you can't find it."

"Got it," he said.

The bus crawled onward. I looked down from my window at the cars, all of them breathing out white exhaust.

"By the way," he said, "how will we recognize each other?"

I hadn't really thought about that. "We'll be connected the whole time, so it should be pretty easy." I smiled. "Just look for the prettiest girl at the airport."

"Easy enough. But then how do I find *you*?"

I laughed over the imaginary line. His teasing had a nervous quality to it, and I had to admit I felt the same about being seen for the first time. I'd worried for a long time, but now I was determined to see it through.

The bus finally broke free of the traffic and sped along as if the driver were determined to make up for

lost time. Cars were still blowing past us, though, way over the speed limit. It was thirteen after twelve.

"I'm definitely not going to be at the airport on time," I told Shinya, "so I'll look for you at the bus stop."

When twelve-twenty came around, I thought, *Shinya's plane should have landed by now*. I sat with my bag in my lap, playing with the Totoro keychain attached to the zipper. I went over every conversation Shinya and I had ever had, starting with the very first, and couldn't help but smile.

I pressed my forehead against the cold glass. The signs outside said that we were almost to the airport. It was twelve thirty-eight; Shinya had probably already gotten off the plane and made it to the bus stop. *He'll probably be waiting for me right when I get off.*

The driver stomped on the brakes and all the passengers swayed forward in unison. My forehead bumped against the window. Everyone got up while the driver was still announcing our arrival, so I stayed in my seat and waited for the aisle to clear. The girl in the purple coat left, and the bus gradually became quiet and empty. Once they were all gone, I stood up.

"The bus is here," I said to the imaginary phone. Past-Shinya was still on the plane.

“Okay. If you can’t find me, just tell me where you’re headed, and I’ll go there in an hour.”

I paid the driver and stepped down off the bus, wallet still in hand. The wind was bitter cold, knifing through my jacket and coloring my cheeks. Overhead a jumbo jet droned past. I looked around for Shinya. *Is he here already? Or am I not going to find him, and tell him to go somewhere else, and I’ll have to meet him there—*

There was a scream, a horrid high-pitched wail that didn’t even sound human. I spun around, looking for the source, and realized a moment too late that it was the squeal of rubber burning against asphalt. A black car barreled up from behind the bus, into a lane I’d thought was empty.

Everything seemed to go in slow motion; it was coming right for me, and I didn’t even have time to scream. My eyes met the driver’s through the windshield. His expression was panicked, his foot kicking the brake far too late. I threw up my arms in a foolish, instinctive reaction.

Something hit me from the side, hard. I fell onto the sidewalk. Behind me, metal exploded against metal, and shattered glass sprayed like rain in every direction.

After a moment, I got to my feet. I moved like a zombie, turning slowly to look behind me. The car had

jumped the curb and rammed the side of the building, twisting into a strange shape against the unyielding concrete. A man lay on the ground, directly in its path, right where I had been standing only seconds before. *He must have pushed me out of the way.* If he hadn't, the car would have squished me against the wall like a bug.

A crowd started to form in a wide circle, and people were shouting for an ambulance. Someone was talking to me, but I paid no attention. I was fine, except for a little scrape where my hand had hit the sidewalk. I still had my bag, even, but the keychain had broken off and was lying in the road.

The man who'd saved my life stared at me, mouth working as though he were trying to say something. He gasped for breath in short, painful gulps, and a pool of blood was already spreading away from him and into the gutter.

I made my way to his side, though my legs were so wobbly it was a wonder I didn't fall down. My throat constricted; I couldn't breathe; my voice was gone. Everything seemed to fall away, including fear, when I knelt by his side.

He looked about the same age as me, maybe a little older. Blood frothed on his lips when he tried to breathe, but his smile was strangely satisfied. He lifted



his right hand with fading strength and managed to touch my cheek.

“Ryo,” he said. “Look . . . in my locker. Number . . . four forty-five . . .”

He coughed, and his eyes fluttered closed.

FOUR

They put us in the same ambulance. Shinya died on the way to the hospital. I saw it happen. I felt like I was dreaming. People were pulling at me, trying to get me to move, asking questions. The paramedics checked my scrapes, and another man asked me if I knew the young man. I didn't answer; I *couldn't* answer.

They searched his pockets until they found his wallet and ID. It was the scooter license he'd told me about, with the picture that looked nothing like him. The paramedic read his name out loud, and I felt the fog in my mind lift. No one seemed to notice that I'd started crying until the ambulance pulled up to the emergency room doors.

The doctors had a gurney waiting for me, but as soon as I was out of the ambulance I pushed their arms away and ran for it. They tried to stop me, but the hospital was an ancient building, modified so often that the corridors were like a maze. I quickly lost my pursuers. Exposed pipes ran along the ceiling, and there were rooms on every side. I ran in whichever direction had the fewest people, until I finally found myself alone.

I waited a moment, to make sure no one was following me, then I wandered around the corner. It was a dead end. The overhead light was broken, and someone had tucked an old, dusty sofa there. No one had needed this little corner of the hospital for a long time. Housekeeping had skipped it, too—grime and cobwebs were everywhere.

I sank down onto the sofa, trying to stay calm. There was only room in my head for one thought.

If I can speak to the past, I can change the present. If Shinya doesn't save me, he doesn't have to die.

I closed my eyes and looked at the imaginary phone. I was relieved to find that it was still connected to past-Shinya. I'd checked the time just before the accident: twelve thirty-eight, and it was five after one now. That made it twelve oh five Shinya's time, with more than half an hour to go.

A trickle of blood dripped from the scrape on my hand. It was starting to hurt, and I wondered if I'd broken something. I tried lifting my hands, but they wouldn't stop shaking.

I picked up the imaginary phone. "Shinya? Are you there?"

"I'm here. What's going on? You've been quiet for the last half hour. Did you finally meet up with me?"

He was still there, only an hour ago. He had no way of knowing he was going to die. *He's probably just sitting on the plane, finding shapes in the clouds.* His voice was warm, gentle, but every word was like a dagger in my heart.

"How long before the plane lands?" I said.

"About twenty minutes. I'm getting really stiff." He paused. "Ryo, is something wrong? You sound upset. Did something happen?"

Suppress your emotions. The imaginary phone line picked up on them and made it hard to lie. I felt like I was being ripped in two.

"Shinya," I said, my voice as cold as I could make it. "When you get off the plane, don't bother leaving the airport. Just buy a ticket and go home."

There was a moment of silence.

"Why?" he said.

"Don't you get it? I hate you! I don't want to see you! I don't want to *ever* have seen you." I curled up into a ball and bit my lip hard enough to draw blood. "I want you to turn around so that our meeting never happened." *He'll live. He might hate me, and I might get hit by the car, but he'll live.*

"I . . ." He hesitated. "Is that really how you feel?"

"Yes."

Silence, as though time itself had stopped. I don't know how long it lasted. In the distance, from the warm, lit part of the hospital, I could hear laughter.

"You're lying," Shinya said. "You just don't want me near the bus stop."

"I-I am not!"

"Yes, you are. We were talking until you got off the bus, but then you clammed up and didn't say a word until just a minute ago. It was like you threw the phone away without hanging up. Something must have stopped you from talking."

"That's not it—"

"That's why you don't want to see me, isn't it? To prevent whatever it was from happening. But it's already happened to me, Ryo. You can't change things."

That can't be true. I felt pathetic, helpless. I have to be able to do something. I can't just sit here and let him die.

"The plane's about to land," he said.

I glanced at the clock—it was one ten. I thought about Shinya's dead body; if not for me, he wouldn't have even been scratched. The thought was unbearable.

"Please," I said. "Stop. If you come, you're going to die." Honesty was my last chance.

He gasped. "Die?"

"When I got off the bus, a car jumped the curb and came right at me. I was so scared that I couldn't move, but you pushed me out of the way and it crushed you instead."

There was a pause. "This happens at twelve thirty-eight, right?"

My breath caught in my chest. "You can't go."

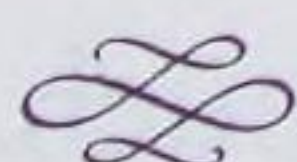
"I'm going to the bus stop, Ryo. I'm going to save you."

"But—"

"I'm just relieved that you don't hate me." He chuckled weakly. "I still don't know what you look like, though. Tell me what you're wearing."

I had one last idea. Time for one last lie.

"I've got a bag, and I'm wearing a purple coat."



The plane landed at twelve after twelve. Shinya was at the lobby near the bus stop by twelve-thirty.

We talked fast, frantically, as though the world was coming to an end. We went over everything we'd shared, and laughed again at the old jokes. It should have been fun, but my tears wouldn't stop. I wanted to reach out and touch his words, treasure them like precious gems.

He said less as the time got closer. I stared at the phone's clock, trying to stop it from changing by force of will. There was still so much I wanted to say, but I couldn't find the words; I wrapped my arms around myself tightly to try and stop shaking.

"Eight minutes left. I'm going to the bus stop now." I could almost see him in my head, throwing down his bags and running.

"Shinya, you don't have to do this. You can still turn back."

He ignored me. "I'm asking people for directions to the bus stop, so don't try to lie about where it is."

Five minutes between the lobby and the curb. That was all the time we had left.

"Thank you for everything," I said. I was glad I could at least say that much. I wanted Shinya to live more than anything.

"I'm outside the airport now," he continued.
"Wow. It's a lot colder than where I live."

The clock read one thirty-seven. One minute until past-me stepped off the bus. I tried to prepare myself for what lay ahead; Shinya would rescue the wrong person, and my body would be crushed and mangled here in the dusty, unused corner of the hospital. *It's okay. I want him to live.* I took a deep breath.

"I see a girl in a purple coat getting off the bus."

He thinks that's me. I felt a little guilty. *I'm sorry for lying to you, Shinya. But what choice do I have? By the time you figure it out, I'll be dead.* The thought didn't scare me, somehow.

"Shinya, I'm sorry." My voice was choked; my eyes filled with tears.

"Wait. No!"

"What?"

"That's not you!" He sounded frantic.

Our imaginary phones could only carry our voices, but at that moment I could almost see him running.

"The *real* you just got off the bus!"

A daydreaming girl, listening to the planes drone past, wondering if the person she'd come to meet was already there . . .

"Shinya, no!"

He ran straight ahead. The car was closing in, much too fast, implacable and deadly. Shinya shoved the girl hard onto the sidewalk.

Over the phone, it sounded like an explosion. I screamed his name. Glass shattered, again. The clock read one thirty-eight.

You can't change what's going to happen, he'd said. I curled up on the forgotten sofa, sobbing.

"Shinya," I said into the phone. "How could you?"

"You made a mistake." He sounded strained. "I noticed the Totoro keychain. Otherwise I might have been fooled."

His voice was getting weaker, as though he were passing out of cell phone range.

"I'm lying on my back," he said. "But I can see you getting up. You look like you're okay."

"I'm okay," I said.

"I pushed you kind of hard. Did you get hurt?"

"Not as badly as you."

"You're coming this way," he said. "You're shaking."

"I knelt down next to you," I whispered.

"I'm reaching up to you."

With my eyes closed, I could feel the fluttering touch of his hand on my cheek.

“Ryo. . .” Shinya sighed. “Your acne isn’t as bad as you made it sound . . .”

Then his voice was gone, and I was listening to a dial tone.

FIVE

I almost froze to death before the nurses found me. The cut on my hand had scabbed over. The driver of the car had died instantly.

I didn't ask about the cause of the accident; I didn't care. I sat through the questions from the police and my parents like a sleepwalker.

I didn't tell anyone about the imaginary phone, of course. But I did go to Shinya's funeral.

Afterward, I decided to visit his favorite dump. It took a while to find, wandering around the unfamiliar town.

When I got there, it was just as he'd described it; the derelict appliances were slick from that morning's heavy rain.

There was a locker, a little one, the kind used to store cleaning supplies. It had a little three-digit combination lock. I put in four-four-five, and it clicked open.

Four forty-five was the time he'd called me, at the very beginning.

The locker was rusty and dented, but it opened easily enough. Inside, protected from the rain, was a little cassette player. Just the kind I'd asked for.

The wind was cold. It started to snow. I picked up the cassette player and cradled it in my arms.



"You lied about the time difference, didn't you?" I asked Yumi.

She didn't answer.

The night before Shinya died, I talked to her. I remembered that she sounded a little strange. But, thinking back on what she'd said . . .

"*Good luck tomorrow.*" I could hear her in my head. It didn't take much for me to realize who she really was.

"Thank you for everything," I said. "I always wanted to be like you, someday."

"Good luck," Yumi said again.

That was the last time I called her.

Years went by, and things changed. I even made some friends. By the time I went to college, I'd bought a real cell phone.

One day, I had finally settled into my first apartment and was about to make a start on washing the dishes, when I heard the old ring tone. "Calling You," from *Baghdad Café*.

Here it is. I closed my eyes and summoned the imaginary phone. I had to blow off a layer of dust before I could pick it up.

"Hello?"

"H-hello. Um. I'm s-sorry to call out of nowhere, but . . ." It was a young girl's voice, full of hesitation and anxiety.

"It's okay," I said. "I wasn't really doing anything." I gave her a fake name.

The girl never realized that she'd connected to her own future, of course. I wanted to tell her everything, but I stayed silent.

You're hurting right now, I thought. You don't have any friends, no one to share your life. You're alone, and the world is harsh and cold. But it'll be all right, I promise. There will always be someone to support you.

I still carry the tape player.

KIZ/KIDS



ONE

There was a special class at school for the problem kids. Anyone out of the ordinary got dumped there: mentally challenged kids, kids who hadn't spoken for years, kids with handicaps that kept them out of the regular classes. The special classroom was off in a corner of the campus, hidden from everyone. It had a special teacher, trained to take care of kids who couldn't tell the difference between candy and their coat buttons.

In the special class, age didn't matter. Anyone who didn't qualify as normal ended up there—no matter what grade they were supposed to be in.

One day, when we were going swimming for P.E., I had to take off my shirt in the locker room.

"I heard your dad gave you that," one of the other kids said, pointing to the scar on my back. He laughed, and everyone turned to look.

The scar was a few years old, but still red and obvious. My father had thrown an iron at me in a drunken rage. Normally I keep it covered up, since I don't like people staring.

I didn't respond, hoping he'd go away. No such luck.

"Is it true?" he said. "Your dad did that? That's just wrong."

Some of the other boys giggled. I clenched my fists until my knuckles went white. In the corner of the locker room was a long-handled brush for cleaning the floor; I grabbed it and before anyone could react, I started beating the kid who'd laughed at me. Before long, he was bleeding and begging me stop, but I kept hitting him until someone pulled us apart.

The next day, the adults came to my house to check on the conditions there and to talk about my "emotional deficiencies." From then on, I was put in the special class.

The teacher was a lady with glasses who would sit with younger kids and cut origami paper into colored rings. They'd made them into a chain so long that it covered most of the wall space of the classroom. She

didn't want me; she told the principal she had too many to take care of already. I think she'd heard about me, too, and didn't want to deal with another violent outburst. It didn't matter in the end, since the principal ignored her.

For the first week, whenever she was around me, the teacher looked nervous. Like I was a time bomb that could explode at any minute. She seemed surprised when I didn't exhibit any violent behavior. When one of the younger kids knocked my lunch on the floor, I didn't even get angry with him.

"Doesn't it make you mad?" the teacher asked me.

"A bit." I shrugged. "He's just a first grader, though. He didn't mean it. And getting mad at him isn't going to help."

She shook her head. "It looks like the file was wrong about you," she said.

I liked the special class. None of the kids were mean. They didn't make fun of each other. Half of them couldn't even go to the bathroom by themselves; some of them couldn't talk, or were scared to death of something stupid. But they were all still trying to keep up with the normal kids, so they didn't have the time to laugh at other people.

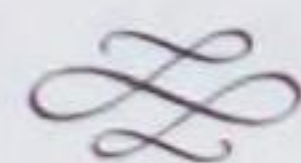
In April, the special class got a new student. He was eleven—the same age as me—and had just transferred



from another school. He was in the special class because he refused to talk to anyone.

He was short and had pale skin, almost like a china doll. The teacher had to hold his hand and walk him into the classroom. He seemed really nervous.

His name was Asato.



In the special class, the teacher handed out an assignment to each person every day. We each got different work, based on how smart we were. Asato got the hardest assignments they had, but he still finished them easily. Despite his obvious intelligence, he never talked to anyone. He could do anything the teacher asked,

but he wouldn't speak. During recess, he curled up in a corner of the room and read.

One day, I was called into the principal's office to discuss why one of the normal kids had bite marks on his arm. I told them he'd been bullying one of the special class kids, but they didn't care. The principal gave me a time-out in the corner of the office, and that seemed to satisfy the normal kid and his mother.

I sat in the office all day. Some of the people who dropped by gave me strange looks, but I ignored them. After a while they forgot I was there, and a couple of the teachers started talking about Asato's family. I carefully pretended not to hear.

"The new boy in the special class," a young teacher said. "He's the one from *that* incident, isn't he?"

The other teacher nodded. "With his father dead and his mother in jail, he's been bouncing around from foster home to foster home. I think he's with some distant relatives at the moment."

I had no idea what they meant by *that* incident, but hearing the story made me feel closer to Asato. I knew what it was like, living in the house of someone you barely knew.

Until a month ago, I'd been living with my parents. My dad drank, and when he did his temper was awful. In

his rage, he would throw stuff at us and break things. He'd hit us, sometimes; once he got so mad that Mom and I ran out of the house without even stopping for our shoes. We walked around the block, over and over, until we thought he'd had enough time to calm down.

He used to work, like everyone else's dad, but for a long time now he'd just been lying around the house. He'd changed. He used to have friends all over the neighborhood, but now they all hated him. He seemed to know it, too, and that just made him angrier.

My mom put up with it, but I could see the relief on her face when he checked into the hospital for good. He was really sick, and nothing was going to save him. For a while I thought it was the beginning of a better life for me and Mom, just the two of us . . . But one day she went out to the grocery store and never came back.

My aunt and uncle turned up when they found out I'd been abandoned. They pretended to be full of concern, eager to give me a normal life, but all they wanted was the house that my parents had owned. Once they were moved in, I was just an obstacle.

I'd accepted all this as the facts of life, but it made me feel like I understood Asato.

Everyone was happy to go home when the bell rang. A lot of the special class kids couldn't go home

alone; they couldn't remember the way, or they'd be too scared on their own, so they waited for their parents to come and pick them up. Asato and I would wait around with them until long after dark, trying to postpone our return to what awaited us.

The classroom got quiet as people left, and the setting sun painted the campus orange. Little sounds echoed—footsteps or the thump of a bouncing rubber ball. The shadows on the empty playground got longer and longer, twisting into a tangled maze. It was hard to believe the school was such a rowdy place during the day.

It was around the same time of day my mom ran away, just as the sun disappeared. I always ended up alone in the classroom with Asato. He would read, and I'd watch TV and draw or work on some craft project.

It was on one of those quiet afternoons that Asato revealed his strange power.



I was carving wood with a knife. I've never been a very good student, but I loved art class. Once I'd done a carving of an owl, and the teacher thought it was

brilliant; she praised me in front of the entire class and put it on the shelf for everyone to look at. It was pretty much the first time anyone had said something like that about me, so it made me happy.

That day, I was working on a carving of a dog. I'd been at it for a while, and there were shavings all over my desk and my clothes. Asato sat in the corner, lost in his book, and from time to time I'd look up at him. He was the same age as me, but so small it looked like a strong wind could carry him away. He had soft, silky hair, and beautiful eyes that were totally absorbed in his reading.

The knife caught on a knot in the wood while I wasn't paying attention, and I put a little too much strength behind it. It slipped free and my hand jerked, slamming against the desk with a surprisingly loud bang. A line of bright red bloomed along my left arm, which had been holding the wood, and blood trickled down to my hand.

I jumped up and ran to get the first aid kit. It hurt quite a bit, but mostly I was afraid that the teacher would take the knife away from me because I had hurt myself. If that happened, I wouldn't get to finish my carving.

Asato stood as well. He moved to my side before I'd even remembered he was there. He so rarely did

anything of his own volition that he was easy to forget. When he saw the cut on my arm, he turned pale and started to suck in air like he was choking.

"Are you okay?" I said, my own pain forgotten for the moment.

"I'm used to this kind of thing," he said. It was the first time I'd heard his voice; it was thin and shaky.

He grabbed my arm and pressed, making more blood trickle from the wound. I couldn't figure out what he was trying to do, and after a moment he gave up and let go. "Sorry," he said. "I thought I could get the cut to close."

Apparently he'd been acting on instinct. It almost made sense that by pressing the skin around a cut back together you could get it to heal. Sort of wishful thinking, like kissing your finger when it was hurt or the ten-second rule for candy that fell on the ground. But there was no easy fix.

I patted him on the shoulder, and he gave me a curious look. The first aid kit was on the shelf, and I opened it up to find the disinfectant. For some reason, the cut didn't look as bad as it had a moment before, and I wondered if Asato's little trick had actually accomplished something.

I looked up and found him staring at his own left arm. He'd rolled up his sleeve—his skin was fish-belly

pale, like something that lived under a rock—and he had a cut of his own, nearly identical to mine. It wasn't deep, but it was in the same place and just the same shape.

“Did you cut yourself before?” I said.

Mute, he shook his head.

I blinked. It was as though the cut had moved from my arm to his, making mine that much better. Apparently Asato came to the same conclusion.

That's impossible, though.

“Can I try that again?” he asked in a soft voice.

I chuckled weakly and held out my arm.

He pressed the cut closed, like before, and concentrated for a moment. A drop of blood fell, not from my arm but from *his*; his cut had gotten noticeably deeper, and mine was half as long as it had been before.

I pulled away, and Asato looked curiously at his own left arm.

“That's about half,” he said. “Now we're even.” It took me a moment to realize he was joking.



From that day on, we became friends, united by our shared secret. We didn't tell anyone else, of course, but we experimented to figure out exactly what he could do.

By pressing on any injury, Asato could move it to his own body. We confirmed that by staking out the nurses office and waylaying underclassmen with minor cuts. Asato could shift scraped elbows, bruised knees, and so on to himself, leaving the injured person untouched. With a little bit of practice, he could do it almost instantly—with the lightest touch. He didn't even have to touch the injured area, just the person in question. Unfortunately, our tests were cut short when the nurse noticed we were hanging out there and she banished us for a while.

"So why are you in the special class?" Asato asked me one day after school.

I was a little hesitant to explain, but I told him about the scar on my back and my violent episode in the locker room. He looked frightened by the time I was done.

I shook my head. "Are you scared of me, now?"

"Of course not!" He sounded surprised. "You're not scary at all."

"Sorry. You just looked—"

"Your *story* was scary, that's all. And kind of sad."

We walked in silence for a moment, and then he turned and grabbed my hand. His expression went suddenly distant.

"What are you doing?" I said.



"I . . . just thought I'd try something." He turned away and didn't say anything else until we parted.

When I went home and changed clothes, I examined myself in my mother's full-length mirror. The scar was gone! It had appeared, I was certain, on Asato's back. It was proof that he could do more than shift little cuts around.

I confronted him about it the following day. "Give me back my scar!"

He just shook his head and smiled. I couldn't get him to budge, no matter what I said. We went back to our surreptitious practice, and before long he could move burns and old scars at will.

TWO

My house was in the suburbs, in the poor part of town. It was part of a row of prefabricated homes, poorly built and poorly insulated; it was hotter inside than out in the summer, and every winter I thought I was going to freeze to death. The alleys between the houses weren't paved, so dust was everywhere when it was dry and they turned to mud pits in the rain.

Everywhere I looked there were little reminders of our poverty. Someone abandoned a tricycle in the road, months ago, and it was just left to rust. A little boy wearing nothing but underwear scraped drawings on the sidewalk with a rock. And then there was the smell—I've never been able to detect it, but people

who pass through put their hands to their noses in disgust.

I didn't like to be at home on the days when we were off from school, so I'd walk through the town with Asato. We zigzagged all over the city, squeezing between buildings and through tiny back alleys.

There was a little park, so dirty that everyone else had abandoned it. We spent a lot of time there. It had a swing set and a seesaw, both of which had rusted into oblivion. Weeds were everywhere, along with a prodigious crop of broken glass bottles. Flaking spray paint adorned the nearby walls, and someone had dumped a tangle of barbed wire in the gutter. A veritable mountain of dead tires had accumulated, filled with stagnant rainwater. It always smelled of wet rubber.

One Sunday, Asato and I were sitting on the swings when a young mother and her son passed by. I watched them idly. Right in front of the park, the child tripped and fell; blood welled from his knee and he shrieked despite his mother's efforts to comfort him.

Asato stood up.

"Leave him alone," I said.

He ignored me. Neither mother nor child noticed him until he gave the boy a soft pat on the head. In that instant, I knew, the scrape had moved to Asato's body. The

boy's knee was filthy, but the skin underneath was whole again. The child stopped crying and looked puzzled.

The mother didn't understand exactly what was going on, but she knew Asato had done something and wanted to show her gratitude. She offered to buy the two of us ice cream, and we happily accepted.

There's a nice ice cream shop on the way home from school. I'd never been inside—I don't get an allowance, and neither does Asato, so we can't afford that sort of thing. We'd sometimes stare through the window, though, and fantasize about how the deserts would taste. It was a brick shop with round tables inside and a whole counter full of buckets of ice cream in every flavor imaginable.

Deciding on what flavor to get, now that we were finally going to get to try one, seemed like a life-or-death decision. Ultimately, I went with cookies and cream, and Asato chose bubblegum. We gave our orders to the young woman at the counter, and the mother paid; she left us to eat our ice cream in peace afterward, and the little boy waved to Asato as they departed.

We knew the woman who worked at the ice cream shop. She was something of an infamous figure among the kids; she always wore a sort of surgeon's mask that hid her face, and speculation was rampant about what

she looked like underneath. I'd never seen her up close before, though.

For the moment, ice cream was more important. I tried to take my time, but ended up practically inhaling mine. Asato was slower, so I waited for him. To pass the time, I went back to the counter and looked at the other flavors.

The woman behind the counter was watching me. She had a scar, I noticed, some kind of a burn; the edge of it just peeked out from behind the mask.

"Hey," I said suddenly. "What do you do with the left over ice cream? Do you have to throw it away after a few days?"

She blinked. "Yeah, sometimes."

"Why not give it to us, then?"

"Nope. Sorry."

"Fine." I had been worth a shot, I figured. Asato had finished eating. "See you later, Shiho."

"How do you know my name?"

"You're wearing a nametag, aren't you?"

Her badge read *Shiho* in English letters.

"You can read that?" she said.

I smiled. "So I'm not as stupid as I look."

She laughed; it was muffled behind the mask. "Tell you what. Help me clean up in here, and I'll let you have some leftovers."

Asato and I were happy to comply. No other customers wandered in while we wiped down the tables and stacked up the chairs. Once we were done, Shiho gave us some ice cream.

At that point, we were ready to bond with anyone who offered us food, like stray dogs, so we quickly became attached to Shiho. We started visiting her shop every day, and after everyone left we'd help her clean up and collect our reward in ice cream. We got to know her pretty well; she was nice, for an adult, and was always willing to listen to our stories. Shiho had big, beautiful eyes—the only thing visible above the mask. They sparkled when she laughed, so I tried to come up with funny stories to make her laugh as often as I could.

Asato talked to Shiho just a little bit at first, but more as time went on. He even started talking to the other kids in the special class, over time. I thought it was a change for the better.



Every time Asato took away someone else's pain, his own collection of injuries grew. His arms were covered with half-healed cuts and scars, and he wouldn't even let me look at his stomach. He refused to change in front of

anyone. I didn't think it was good for him, so I told him not to use his power unless it was absolutely necessary.

One day, at the ice cream shop, we were leaning on the counter and talking with Shiho. She was minding the store alone, as usual; the real owner hated kids and would leave her there for hours at a time while he went off to gamble.

Asato was too short to lean on the counter, so he stood on his toes and rested his chin on it. Shiho grabbed his hand.

"What happened to you, Asato?" There was a cut on his palm, a relatively deep one. "Are you okay?"

He must have healed someone on the way over, but I hadn't noticed. Asato didn't seem to mind the cuts and bruises; he'd usually leave them alone unless they were bleeding badly. Shiho made a big fuss, though, and dug a cute cartoon band-aid out of her purse for him. It seemed to make Asato happy. He thanked her sincerely and kept it on for days, even after the cut itself had vanished.



There was this kid at school I really hated. He was a few years older than me, tall, with vicious, mad-dog eyes.

His gang never seemed to leave his side. Every time I passed him in the halls or on the street, I flinched; I kept expecting him to sneak up on me and flatten me when I wasn't looking.

He had good reason to have it in for me. A few years back, he'd been making fun of my dad—everyone in the neighborhood hated my dad, and I was tainted by association. I'd gotten so mad that I pushed him out of a second-story classroom window.

Thankfully, he'd graduated from elementary school since then, so I didn't have to see him every day. I thought he'd forgotten me until I ran into him on the way to the ice cream shop. Asato and I were heading there after school, like we always did, and the kid was standing there in his black school uniform, waiting for us.

I tried to ignore him. He was older than me, bigger and stronger; nothing good could come out of messing with him. But he smiled as I walked past, and said, "Hey, kid. I heard about your mom."

I clenched my fists and walked faster.

"I heard she—"

I'm not going to repeat what he said, but it was enough to make me completely lose my cool. I leapt at him, all caution gone. That was exactly what he wanted, of course. He had a metal bat with him—I think he was

on the baseball team—and he sidestepped my clumsy punch and swung it at my head. I blocked with my arm, and there was a terrific *crunch*. I dropped to ground, screaming in pain, and the kid looked on with a smile.

Asato, who'd been watching blankly, ran forward. He touched my arm before I could stop him, and my pain vanished instantly. At the same time, there was an audible *crack* as the bone in Asato's arm shattered, but he remained expressionless.

I took a long, sobbing breath and raised my head. "Asato?"

He wasn't paying any attention. Instead, he stumbled toward the guy with the bat. He looked tiny and pathetic juxtaposed with the thug's bulky frame. The kid didn't understand what was going on, and I'm not sure Asato really knew either; he reached out to touch the kid's arm, and the tough baseball player fell to his knees with a shriek. His arm flopped on the pavement—it had one extra bend above the elbow.

Asato had moved the injury from me to the kid, I realized. *The jerk broke his own arm with that bat.* That was the moment we discovered the second part of his strange ability: he could give his own injuries to others.

Hearing the kid in pain scared Asato back to his senses. He looked horrified that he'd hurt someone, and

I quickly grabbed his hand and dragged him away from the scene. If I'd left him there, he probably would have taken the broken arm back.

If he can move his own injuries, I thought, he should get rid of everything! Just dump it all on someone else, so he doesn't have to suffer through the cuts and scars. I knew the perfect target, too: my dad. No one cared what he went through, least of all me, and to top it off he was going to die soon in any case. Perfect.



It didn't take long to get to the hospital where they were keeping Dad. It was a big place, within walking distance of the town. The entrance was marked by a bronze statue of a boy playing a trumpet, surrounded by a host of enraptured birds. The boy somehow reminded me of Asato.

I didn't know what room my dad was in—I'd never visited him before—so we had to ask a nurse. Once we found it, I paused. Suddenly, irrationally, I was afraid—as though my dad were going to leap out of bed and beat me black and blue one last time. I tiptoed forward and peeked past the door. He was asleep in a hospital bed, connected to a forest of tubes and wires.

The doctors had told us that he might never wake up, which was just fine by me.

“Go ahead, Asato.”

I posted myself as lookout while Asato hesitantly approached the bed. I was a little worried that he might not be able to do it, since he didn't like to hurt anyone, but I'd carefully explained that my dad was asleep and would probably never feel a thing. It only took a second. He touched my dad's hand lightly and in an instant all Asato's injuries were gone.

Once we'd found a “dumping ground” and confirmed that it worked, we went back to experimenting. There were all kinds of people in the hospital, and a lot of them were in pain or permanently scarred. I would talk to them, make them promise to keep everything a secret, and then Asato would take care of the rest. We limited our subjects to kids, since I was pretty sure they wouldn't tell on us; even if they did, the adults wouldn't believe them.

Most people were pretty reluctant, up until the point where their burns or surgical scars vanished as if they'd never existed. Then they were ecstatic. We never asked for anything, but sometimes they'd give us money anyway, enough to keep us rolling in ice cream and candy.

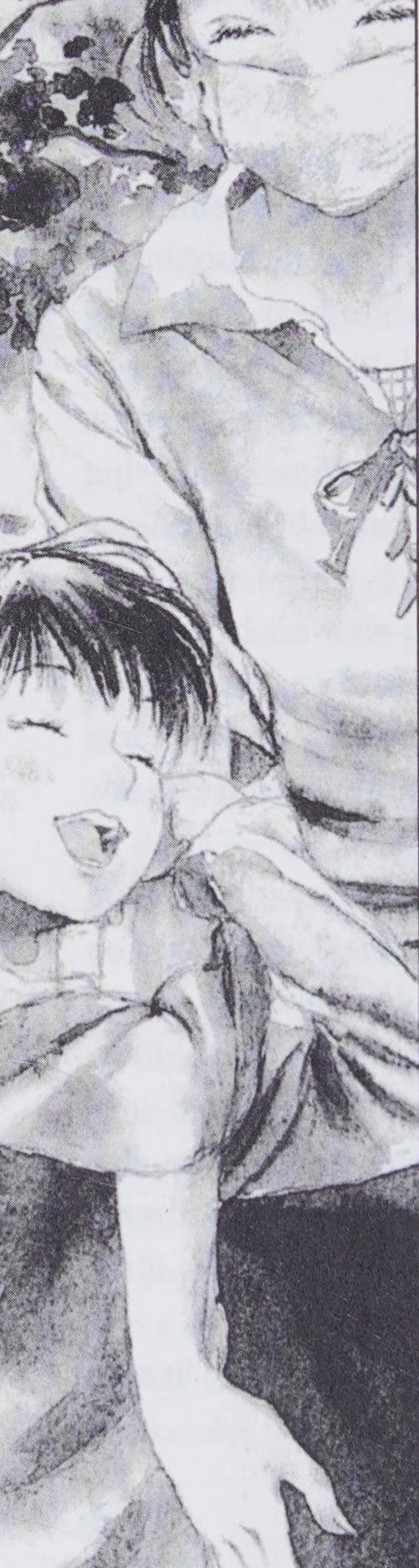
Asato never hesitated to move someone's injuries to himself. He seemed to think that if someone had to be hurt, it might as well be him. Looking at someone in pain was hard for him to bear. I was glad I'd convinced him to use my dad, or else one visit to the hospital could have killed him. There were some things he couldn't move, like illnesses, and being unable to help those people sometimes brought Asato to the brink of depression.

Despite that, the kids thought we were heroes. We got to visit Shiho every day, and now we were able to pay for our own ice cream. I tried to keep Asato's spirits up—I think Shiho and I were the only ones who ever saw him smile.

We'd meet Shiho after she was done with work and walk to the run-down park, where she'd push Asato on the swings. I didn't hold her hand on the way—I was eleven, much too old to be holding hands with a girl—but Asato clung to her side.

The three of us would talk about silly things, like the worst lie we'd ever told, the worst-tasting food we'd ever eaten, or what the best way to die would be if we had to choose.

"I'd want a lover's suicide," Shiho said. "It's so romantic."



"Something lonely and cold," I said. "An abandoned train station, maybe."

"I want . . ." Asato trailed off. He didn't want to think about it, for which I didn't blame him. The sky grew darker and we headed home, with Asato trailing behind Shiho just like always.

She was fond of him. Shiho had a younger brother, she'd told me, who'd died in the same fire during which she'd gotten her scar. I think he looked like Asato.

In all the time we'd known her, she'd never taken off her mask. I decided to ask her about it, then and there, when we paused at the intersection where we had to part ways.

"Shiho, I want to see your face."

For a moment I thought she was going to argue, but she put her fingers through the straps of the mask without a word and gave it a tug. Before she could get it off, she was shaking; finally she pulled her hand away and shook her head, gasping for breath.

"I'm sorry," Shiho said. "I . . . I can't."

Asato reached out to her. They held hands all the time, but this was different; I grabbed him before he could touch her. I knew what he wanted to do, but we had to wait. If Asato moved her scar, it would end up on his face; even if we transferred it to my dad, it would be on *his* face. Most of the injuries we'd given Dad were minor cuts and scars. Since he was covered in blankets up to his neck, no one had been able to tell the difference. But if we gave him a big facial scar, we'd get busted. I knew we had to keep Asato's power secret from the adults; if they found out, there was no telling what they'd do.

Shiho apologized again and walked away. She didn't know the secret, so my behavior probably seemed strange to her.

"We'll help her," I told Asato. "Not yet. But soon."

THREE

One day, when Asato was out from school with a cold, the teacher asked me to take something to his house. It was a note asking whether anyone would be attending for Parents' Day; in the normal classes, that wasn't a big deal, but it was different in the special class.

I'd asked the teacher about it the week before. "Most of the kids here can't even do their work, so why are we inviting parents in to watch them?"

"Even if the kids can't do everything," the teacher said, "we want the parents to see how hard they're trying. Raising a child with special needs can be very hard on the parents. It's nice for them to see that the kids are working hard, too."

That made sense, sort of. "But I don't think anyone will come for me or Asato," I said.

The teacher frowned and said nothing.

The day she gave me the note, I headed to Asato's house after school.

I knew where it was, though I'd never been there. Asato didn't seem to want me to come over, and I'd never pressed him.

Note in hand, I rang the bell. It looked like a normal house, the same as the ones on either side. The nameplate beside the front door had a different last name than Asato's.

A middle-aged woman answered the door. She gave me a puzzled look. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Asato's friend," I said. "I brought this for him. It's from the teacher."

She nodded and invited me in. Everything looked normal—there was a sofa and a TV in the living room, and Asato's bedroom was upstairs.

Asato seemed confused to see me at first, but then his face lit up.

"You came!" he said happily.

The woman left us alone. I could hear other kids in the house; Asato had a foster brother and sister, I remembered.

I told him about what the teacher had said about Parents' Day and I gave him the note. He nodded thoughtfully.

The door opened a crack. "Would you like to stay for dinner?" the woman asked me.

Knowing my aunt and uncle, there wasn't going to be much waiting for me at home, so I agreed.

"Asato," she said, "get cleaned up. You should have taken a bath before your friend got here, don't you think?" Catching my expression, she explained. "I tried to give him a bath today, but he refused to take his clothes off. Sometimes I don't know what's wrong with him . . ."

After she left, I said, "You took somebody's cut today, didn't you?"

He nodded.

I sat next to Asato that night at dinner. Everyone else had already eaten, so we were the only ones at the table. No one seemed to pay any attention to him in that house, as long as he was fed and stayed clean; he moved through their family like a ghost.

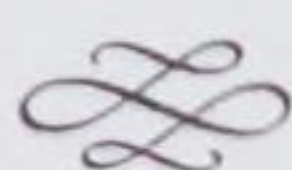
"He's had it so hard, you know." The woman sat down to talk to me as we were finishing up. *I guess she finished her housework.* I noticed Asato was shaking.

"Hard?" I said.

“Didn’t you know? His mother killed his father, and then stabbed him with a butcher knife. He almost died in surgery.”

She said this cheerfully, as though her grisly story was just the latest neighborhood gossip and Asato wasn’t sitting right beside me. She talked about how horrible it was, and how Asato’s mother was just a regular housewife and she had no *idea* what made her do it, and on and on until I couldn’t take it anymore. I jumped up from the table and grabbed her collar.

“Don’t you see what this is doing to him?” I hissed. She looked into my eyes, a little frightened, and I let go of her in disgust. “Just don’t talk about it again. Or else . . .”



I’m not sure if I left the house or I was kicked out—it happened so fast. It was a long, dark road back to my aunt and uncle’s house, and all I could think about was the smug look on the woman’s face as she recounted Asato’s tragedy. Most of the streetlamps had burnt out, and the alley I took to get home was full of looming shadows. There was a dead dog lying under someone’s porch; I had first noticed it days ago, when it had

crawled in there to die, and no one had cleaned it up yet. The sky was a uniform gray, empty of stars, and the air stank of the dirty river.

I thought about my dad. We'd been visiting him a lot to dump injuries on him, but I made an effort never to get within ten feet of his bed. I'd watched Asato touch him, though, moving painfully with whatever injury he'd taken on until he gently brushed Dad's cheek. My father's comatose form gave no evidence that he felt any pain.

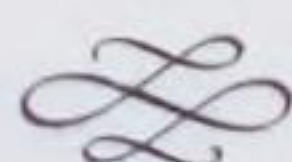
Everyone hated my dad. He was a drunk, alternately violent and depressed. Nobody wanted to help him; when he finally got sick, everyone said he was better off. Even after that, though, he was the source of all my problems. Because of his bad reputation, the tough kids at school picked on me, and I got into a lot of fights. The teachers knew about him, too, and so they were biased against me. It all came back to my dad, and I hated him.

But I also had memories from when he was still kind, before the violence started. He used to work, and tried to make Mom and me happy. I remember him patting me on the head while I watched him work on building a doghouse once. This was at our old place, which had an actual yard with grass. I don't remember

the dog, but I was pretty young. All I remember is Dad smiling at me while he worked.

Who knows if that scene was ever real? Memory is tricky that way. I try to tell myself that it happened, but when I think about how my dad is now, it's hard to believe. I'm not sure if we even *had* a dog. If we did, you'd think I'd be able to remember it.

In the dark, I touched the smooth skin on my back where the scar used to be. For some reason, it made me feel sad. It was a keepsake from when Dad threw an iron at me, and now Asato had moved it to my father's back.



The next day, Shiho was very depressed when she got off from work. We sat on the rusty swings at the park as usual, but she didn't seem to be able to raise her head.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"There are things in this world," Shiho said quietly, "that are worse than you can imagine."

She patted Asato on the head affectionately, but her gaze seemed distant, sad. I sat there, frozen by her words, not sure what to say. Asato wanted to cheer her up; he started explaining about his power. The words

spilled out in a rush, clumsy and run together. She was the first adult we'd ever told.

At first, she was barely listening. Finally Asato said, "I could probably move your burn, if you wanted."

Shiho's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"I think so. Then it would be on me, though," Asato said.

"Tell you what. Would you take it, just for a few days? I've always wanted to walk around town without a mask, just once."

Asato nodded slowly. My stomach churned, but I couldn't bring myself to intervene. *Just a few days. She deserves that much, doesn't she?*

Shiho faced Asato and he reached out to touch her cheek. The air suddenly smelled like burnt meat. Quicker than it takes to blink, the skin on Asato's face was twisted and gnarled into a horrible scar.

Shiho pulled her mask down slowly, as though in disbelief. Her scar was gone. Without it, she was beautiful. I put my arm around Asato; it was hard to look at him, but I was proud that we'd been able to give Shiho at least a few days of happiness . . .



Three days passed. Shiho left town and never came back.

People had always been friendly to Asato, even if he wouldn't talk to them; he had a pretty face and an almost cherubic expression. Once he was wearing Shiho's scar, though, everything changed. Even the people we'd helped, people who'd had a lifetime of scars removed from their bodies, turned their backs on him. I had no choice but to make Asato wear a mask, just like Shiho had. Even *I* had trouble looking at him without one.

I wondered what his family thought about it. I asked him, but he wouldn't reply.

The next day, after school, we said goodbye to our teacher and walked home just as the sun was going down. It painted the sky red, and the deep black shadows of the trees made me feel like I was walking through a painting. The streetlights clicked on, and the balmy air felt calming.

Asato stopped in front of a house. It was a regular house, one of the ones we always passed on the way home, but tonight the lights were on inside and I could see a woman making dinner. The smell wafted out, warm and delicious; it made me think of my mother.

Asato fell to his knees and started to cry softly. He must have been thinking the same thing. "Do you think my mother didn't want me?" he said.

I took his hand and tried to coax him to walk again. "Don't say things like that. You're going to live with her when she gets out of prison, right?"

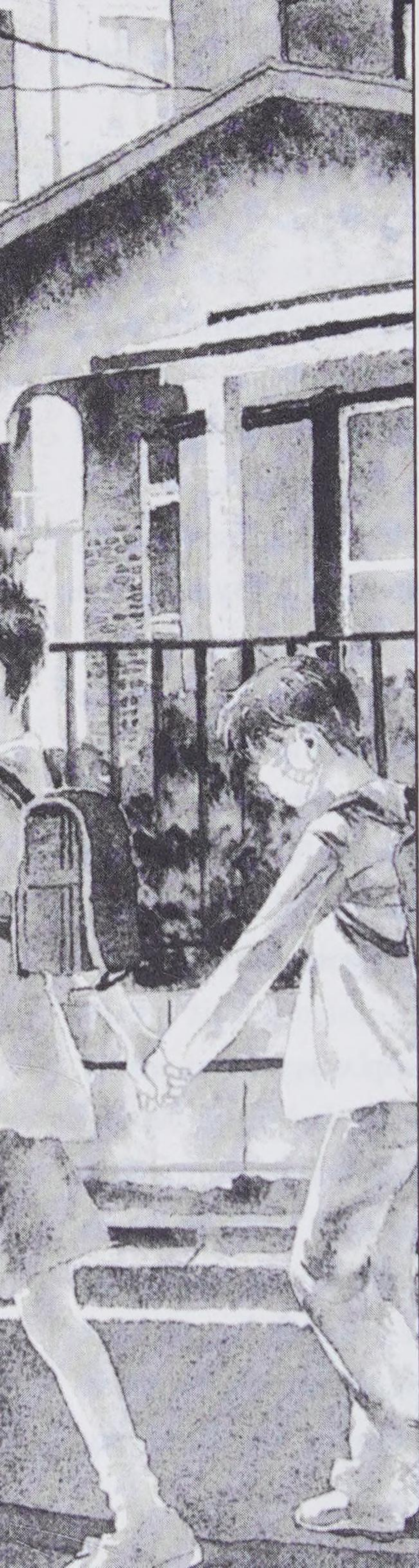
He blinked away tears. "Why didn't Shiho come back?"

I paused. "She couldn't take it anymore. It was an awful thing to do, but I'm not sure I blame her."

Asato stumbled to his feet and walked beside me, but he stared blankly into the distance. "Why is life so painful?" he muttered.

I didn't have a good answer for that. I held his hand until we got to the place where we had to separate, and then I went home. When I got there, my uncle gave me a box he'd filled with Dad's old stuff from the house. It was junk, he said, and I should get rid of it. It was so heavy I had to rest several times on the way to the dump.

In my neighborhood, the dump was just an empty lot overgrown with weeds. There was a big hole dug in the center, and people were slowly filling it up with things they didn't want anymore. The smell was awful, and a swarm of tiny, biting flies came after me as soon as I got close. I held my nose and dragged the box to the edge of the hole. When I turned it upside down, my Dad's old clothes and shoes came tumbling



out and were swallowed by the malodorous darkness. Something small got caught on the edge of the hole; I thought about kicking it in, but the bugs had gotten so bad I had to flee.

It took me hours to get to sleep when I got back, even after I'd cleaned up. I couldn't help but feel like I'd done something bad by throwing away my Dad's stuff, even if he was a no-good lowlife.



The next day, I went back to the hospital with Asato. The weather was dreary, and the clouds were smokestack-black. I heard on my uncle's radio that it was going to rain by that afternoon.

Asato was quiet, as usual. He wore a long-sleeved shirt and pants, showing as little skin as he could manage. His face was hidden behind a huge surgeon's mask.

A little ways away from the bronze statue that marked the hospital's main entrance, there was a small hill with an ambulance bay at the top. As long as there were no incoming ambulances, it was virtually abandoned, so it was a good place to talk in private. Asato and I crouched in the shrubbery.

"You have to move the scar to my dad," I told him.

I couldn't bear leaving him like this. Moving it to my dad was the only choice; people might think it was strange, but they wouldn't suspect *us*. All we had to do was play dumb.

"But . . ." Asato hesitated.

"There's no other way! You can't keep walking around like this."

I grabbed his hand without waiting for him to answer and dragged him into the hospital. We didn't say a word the whole way to my dad's room. There was a doctor in the elevator with us, but he rushed out in a hurry, as though a patient somewhere were in trouble.

I thought about my dad. Even if he weren't sick, he probably wouldn't visit the school on Parent's Day. The teacher had said she wanted to show the

parents how well their children were doing, but who would want to come see me and Asato? Nobody cared whether we went to school or dropped out . . . whether we lived or died.

We followed the doctor as he hurried down the hallway. A nurse waved him onward, holding open a door; as we approached, I realized it was the door to my dad's room. I left Asato back and peeked around the door, only to find the doctor and the nurse looking back at me.

"Who are you?" the doctor said brusquely. I ignored him and walked up to the bed. It was the first time I'd looked at my dad's face up close, and I almost didn't recognize him. He was horribly thin, with sunken cheeks, and the bones in this face were clearly visible.

I felt my anger melting away. He was dead, and I couldn't hate him anymore. I felt sorry for him, even. He died alone, with no one to mourn.

He was a horrible person while he was alive, and he screwed up my life beyond recognition. But I realized that if I turned away, he really would be alone. I had to feel sad, because there was no one else to do it. I put my head on his chest and sobbed; for all my hatred, it still hurt to see him like this.

Asato was standing next to me when I lifted my head.

"Move all the scars to me," I said. I didn't want them to find my dad with all that pain on his body.

Asato shook his head. "I can't."

"But—"

He turned and ran. I took a step after him, then looked back at my father. His blanket was pulled back, enough to expose his arm and take a pulse. It was clean, without a mark on it. I stared blankly for a second, then I suddenly understood.

Asato had been lying to me. He claimed he'd moved everything to my father, but he'd kept it all on himself. I pulled the blanket back and tore my father's pajama shirt open; even the scar from his surgery was gone.

"You . . ." the doctor began, not sure what to say.

I ran after Asato. He'd fooled me, over and over. He always wore long sleeves and pants, and I'd never asked him to show me that the scars were gone. I'd never asked for proof of anything! All this time he'd been taking the pain and suffering of everyone we'd met and locking them away in his own body.

FOUR

I found Asato at the main entrance of the hospital, by the bronze statue of the boy playing the trumpet. He was reaching out to a girl around his age. She had a cast on her arm. When he touched her, I heard the *snap* as Asato's bone broke, but his eyes showed no sign of pain.

The girl ran off, only glancing back briefly at Asato. I wondered when she'd figure out that she'd experienced a miracle.

I felt a spot of cold on my cheek, and a moment later rain spattered across the dry concrete. There was no one around, just me and Asato. He leaned on the statue, too tired to support himself, sucking in air with shallow breath. He tore off the mask, and I

saw that Shiho's scar was overlaid with other cuts and bruises that made his face puffy and swollen. I fought the urge to look away.

I'd found him by following the trail of strange stories from my dad's room; people who turned up at the hospital for treatment and suddenly felt no more pain—a girl whose giant scar was missing, a mother hugging her instantly healed child . . . None of them had noticed the passage of a little boy riddled with injuries.

He closed his eyes as he leaned against the statue. One eyelid flickered; the bruise there wouldn't let it close all the way.

"Why?!" I demanded. "Why did you do this?"

"If someone has to be in pain," he said softly, "better it be me." Asato hesitated. "I'm the one who isn't wanted."

"What do you mean?"

"Look."

The rain was coming down hard, now, but Asato shrugged off his jacket and pulled up his shirt. His chest had so many cuts, scars, and patches of discolored skin that he looked barely human. It was pure suffering, the pain of an entire community, compressed into one small body. I could almost hear this tortured boy cry out with the sobs of a multitude of people.

“The night Mom killed Dad—” Asato began, then stopped. His brow furrowed. His hair was slick with rain. “She came into my bedroom, too. She had a knife in her hand . . .”

He ran his finger across a huge scar on his belly. It was from the incident his foster mother had talked about, I’d realized. He’d always been careful to hide it.

I heard ambulance sirens in the distance. A horrible premonition crept over me.

Asato’s left arm dangled, seemingly nerveless; he clutched himself with his right hand. He had to force his words out, past choking sobs. “I . . . I don’t want to live any longer.”

Suicide. Of course. Asato wanted the pain; he wanted



everything to end. He would be the ultimate repository for all these people, and in death he'd take their pain away forever.

Desperate, I started talking. "Look, Asato. I don't know why your mom wanted to kill you, but it doesn't mean you're not wanted. You're just unlucky. Your mom had her own reasons, her own problems—just like Shiho; just like my mom. That's all."

The rain fell harder. Asato looked up at me with sad eyes. The approaching sirens became deafening. I saw the red lights of the ambulance getting closer, glittering on the wet pavement.

The doctors stood there, waiting as it pulled up. They opened the back doors and removed the gurney. Asato turned his back on me and started to limp toward them. The pain of dozens of people wracked his body; he could barely move, barely even stand, but he pushed onward. My eyes picked out a familiar scar on his naked back, the scar he'd taken from me. Asato receded into the flashing lights, until he seemed like nothing more than a shadow.

"Asato!"

He ignored my shout and kept walking. I hurried after him; he was easy to catch, and I grabbed his thin shoulders and held him back by force.

"I'm sorry," Asato whispered, his voice full of guilt. Sharp pain suddenly stabbed through both my legs . . . All the injuries that had been dumped onto Asato's legs were now on mine. I toppled, unable to stand, and he shook off my hands. I wanted to cry. Asato, who wouldn't hurt anyone, was willing to dump his pain on me in order to die.

I lay on the ground, looking up through the haze of rain. Up on the slope, the doctors unloaded the gurney. I could see an accident victim lying on it, a little boy, covered in blood from head to toe. He looked like he was dead already.

Asato stepped up beside him. I knew what he was going to do, and what it would cost; with the injuries he'd already taken from so many others, accepting the boy's pain would kill him.

"Stop!" I crawled toward him, dragging myself along by my elbows. The adults looked up, but Asato was already too close. He laid a hand on the blood-drenched boy's cheek. His eyes were closed and he looked peaceful. In an instant, Asato's body collapsed like a house of cards, folding in on itself with a horrible *crack-crack-crack* of bones. I screamed as he fell to the ground like a rag doll.

Sheer adrenaline gave me strength enough to overcome the pain in my legs, and I pushed myself up and

ran to his side. The adults had no idea what was going on, so they clustered around Asato; I pushed through them and cradled him against my chest. His tiny frame, limp and broken, had carried the pain of so many people. Tears streamed down my face and mixed with the rain.

“Asato?”

When I spoke his name, his eyes opened slightly. He was still there, but I could feel him fading away. I grabbed his hand.

“Split it between us,” I begged. “Half and half, okay?”

He stared at me without any expression on his face. Blood leaked from his body and washed away in the rain.

None of us have the power to avoid misfortune, or to change our fate. That was as true of Asato’s mom as it was of the rest of us; I don’t know why she tried to kill him, but I’m sure that in her mind she didn’t have a choice.

That sort of thing shouldn’t exist, I prayed. Everyone should have a choice.

My eyes closed.

FIVE

You still won't tell me what happened?" my teacher asked. She'd come to visit me in the hospital.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I said. "Besides, it's a secret."

By the time I woke up, five days had passed. My body was wrapped in bandages from head to toe, and all my limbs were in casts. Once, I tried to stand, but I could only flail vainly, so a nurse quickly pushed me back into bed.

"Did your aunt and uncle come to visit you?" my teacher pressed.

"Is everything okay?"

I nodded.

At first all the doctors seemed suspicious of me, since no one had any idea how I'd been injured. They even had the police in to question me, but there was no evidence of foul play. After a while they gave up, and I was just another patient in the hospital.

"All the kids in class miss you," my teacher said. "So get better quick."

"You don't have to try and make me feel better. No one there would miss me."

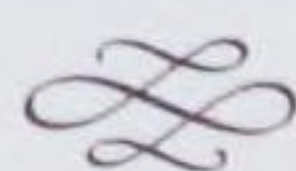
She looked surprised. "Of course they do! Everyone in the special class looks up to you."

I didn't have a reply.

After a moment the teacher started gathering her things. "Say hi to Asato for me," she said, "once he wakes up."

With extreme effort, I turned my head to look at the next bed over, where Asato was sleeping amidst crisp, white sheets.

"I will," I said.



Thankfully, I could move my right hand. My left was in a cast, but the fingers were free, so I could at least grip a block of wood. I kept working on the wooden dog

I'd started before this whole thing began. It had been a while, but I wanted to finish. The shavings made a small pile on the bed. The nurses frowned at the mess I made, but they let me work. My hands had almost no strength, so it was slow going.

The day I finished the dog, I remembered something that had been bothering me. I was recovered enough to walk around a little bit, so after I'd made sure the nurse wasn't looking, I clambered out of bed.

"I'm going out for a while," I told Asato.

"I'll go, too!"

"Don't be stupid. You need to stay in bed."

The corridor was empty, so I managed to escape from the hospital. I still needed crutches to walk, and every step sent sharp pains through my legs. My forehead was quickly drenched with sweat.

By the time I made it all the way through the town and down to the dump, the sky started reddening. I found the hole where I'd tossed my dad's stuff. I lay down on my stomach, ignoring the pain from my stitches. Something had caught on the edge of the hole, and I felt around until I put my fingers on it. It was a dog collar—our dog's collar. The wooden dog had reminded me.

I still can't remember what kind of dog we had. But it was proof that I hadn't imagined the memory of my

dad being normal and building our doghouse. It wasn't something I'd simply wished for; it was real. I clutched the collar to my chest as I made my way back to the hospital. The nurses scolded me, but I didn't mind.

The next day dawned bright and beautiful. Asato wanted to go on the hospital's roof, so I broke out for the second day in a row. The nurses would definitely label me a troublemaker.

The stairs to the roof were stuffy and dim, and we took extra time climbing them because of our crutches. We were both sweating by the time we got to the top. A tiny window let in enough light to make out a rusted iron door. I pushed it open, and the light that streamed in was blinding. The roof was flat and vast, and it made me sorry that I couldn't run. A half-dozen bed sheets dried on a clothesline.

We stepped outside, shading our eyes against the sun. I could see the whole town—the school, the ice cream shop, the park where we used to play. It all looked so tiny; it was hard to believe we'd spent our lives there.

Asato looked around in amazement, his fine hair blowing in the breeze. We could see the bronze statue at the entrance, where he'd nearly died.

I unraveled some of my loose bandages and let them stream in the wind. It felt so good that I took off

my shirt, carefully avoiding the still-tender scars. I had a number of tiny ones, plus one that spread across my stomach. It was half of Asato's, from the time his mother had stabbed him. The two of us had shared everything.

I remembered the pain from when he'd moved the injuries to me. It was horrible, almost unbearable. But whatever it had been, it was only half of what he had carried.

"Here," I said. "This is for you."

I handed him the little dog, and his eyes went wide with surprise. He spent a moment examining it from all angles, then looked up at me. There were tears in his eyes.

"Why are you crying?" I asked him.



"I don't know." He shook his head. "I'm not sad. But I can't stop."

I don't know why Asato was given his power. Maybe only the pure of heart are chosen—those who would gladly sacrifice themselves. It is, literally, the power over life and death, both for him and for others. I don't know where it came from, but I know why he was chosen to receive it.

"Thank you," I said.

He looked puzzled.

Thank you, I thought, for sharing your pain with me. You told me you were an unwanted child, but you were wrong.

The day my mom left, I sat alone in my darkened house and thought, *That's just how the world is.* No matter how far you walk, life is just a long, dirty alley; no matter how many corners you turn, the stench of dead dogs and a putrid river will follow. When Shiho left, it didn't surprise me. Just another turn.

But watching Asato, I realized that the world wasn't so bad. I thought there was nothing in the town but rust and junk. I was wrong. Asato was the one pure thing that made everything else worthwhile. He was like the speck of divine grace that's inside even the most evil of hearts. Anything so pure is destined to be betrayed, again and

again. But in the end, he still saved people. Not just from their wounds, but from the darkness inside them.

He saved me. He could never be unwanted.

Even halved, the injuries and scars we carried were serious. But they were a source of pride for me. Someday we may move those marks, erase them, but until then I wanted Asato to remember that there was someone in the world who was willing to share his pain.

I put my hand in my pocket and gripped the dog collar my dad had left me. Somewhere in the landscape spread in front of me was my mom, and Shiho. Wherever they were, I hoped they were happy. I didn't feel betrayed, or angry. Just calm.

We'd gone through such hard times. There was nowhere left to go but up.

FLOWER SONG



PROLOGUE

When I close my eyes, I can still see the accident. I can hear dying people's screams, mothers shouting for their children. The moment that train car turned into a living hell is forever burned into my mind. I was pressed between broken seats, and I could see a child's leg sticking straight up from under the chair in front of me.

Physically, I wasn't hurt too badly, but the damage to my mind and soul was irreversible. Most of the victims were taken to the general hospital, but they brought me here.

The special hospital was an enormous multilayered casket filled with living corpses. Each room was a square wooden cage, dim and soundless. In the wind, the windows shook and clanked like ice cubes in a tall glass.

I thought about the endless number of eyes that had gazed up at the same ceiling I was now staring at. The air was thick. I'm sure it was all the death and misery that transpired here.

On the morning I met her, let's just say I was a little blue. It had only been a week since the accident. Most of my literal wounds had healed, but my emotional prognosis seemed a bit more bleak. Who could have known that I would come to love that girl? Well, maybe she wasn't a girl quite yet . . .

ONE

I awoke in bed and opened my eyes; I was stiff and drenched with sweat. The hospital room was so quiet that I could hear my own heart's rapid palpitations. The bed squeaked as I sat up, but my roommates both slept soundly.

The sky began to lighten, and a little sun filtered in through the frosted glass. I opened the window and could see leaves and flowers and branches batting back and forth so quickly that I could almost hear the hum. The window looked like a picture frame bordering an image of a distant place that I would never be able to experience. Even if I were to leave my room and step outside, I wouldn't be there. My mind would be bound in the dull, wooden box with the squeaky bed.

I stepped onto the freezing floor and poked around for my slippers. After performing my morning ablutions, I glanced in the mirror—a pale, nasty face stared back at me. I didn't want to go back to bed.

I decided to take a walk in the woods. I'd been staring out at the woods in the hospital yard, and now I happened to catch a glimpse of them in the mirror. It looked depressing, dark, and cold, but that was the kind of place I liked to visit.

I'd never been out of the building, not even the yard. I shuffled out in my pajamas, following a narrow path that led into the trees. I didn't know where it went, but that didn't matter to me. Plants tangled round the trail on either side, but it wasn't hard to navigate; the dirt path had been packed down by previous travelers. I stepped carefully across protruding roots and fallen branches.

Just as I was getting tired and thinking about turning back, the path took a wide turn and I found myself standing in a clearing. The claustrophobic feeling of the forest vanished instantly; the brush had been cleared back to the tree line, leaving smooth, lawnlike grass. In the center of the clearing was a huge, dead tree, leafless and naked. Its surface was as white as stone, and its thick roots looked like hands scrabbling out of the dirt. For a

moment, I felt that the clearing wasn't natural—that the other trees didn't dare get too close to this monster.

I walked up and took a seat on its enormous roots. When I looked up, the branches spread out as though attacking the sky. I closed my eyes and leaned back, lost in thought. I remembered gasping for breath, clutching my lover's cold, lifeless fingers . . .

Sudden footsteps brought me back to reality. A nurse walked past, nodding casually; I could tell by her expression that she was surprised to see me there. The hospital encouraged patients to wander the grounds—though not too far—but many of them never left their rooms or even their beds.

I stood up to start walking back toward the hospital. Before I left the clearing, I noticed a green speck on the sea of dark soil. It was a tiny plant, right at the base of the tree, taking shelter in the lee of the roots. I thought it was a flower, though it hadn't bloomed yet. It had a bright-green stem and straight leaves, and it was covered in white fuzz that trapped the morning dew. There was a round bud the size of my fingertip hanging off the end of the stem, made of overlapping white petals. The stem bent over with the weight.

What made me stop and look was the fine, silky hair that trailed from the opening in the bud where the petals

met. There were just a few strands, but they danced in the breeze. I reached down and brushed them, then giggled; it felt just like human hair against my skin.

After a moment, I shrugged and left the plant behind. As I turned my back on the huge tree, I heard an odd sigh, as though someone was stretching after waking up. Surprised, I looked back, but there was no one there.



I had a visitor the next day. I've known Satomi for more than ten years before I came to the hospital, and she'd visited often.

I come from a big family, so there were always relations, servants, and in-laws around. Satomi wasn't family, but we'd played together a lot as children. The other kids had teased us for that. We would always go fishing or catch bugs, and come back with our skin burned a dark brown. Now Satomi's complexion was a beautiful, lily white.

It was a long way from the old house to the hospital. My parents usually couldn't come, so they'd send Satomi over to tend to me. During the visit, my roommate Haruki would be all smiles. Normally he was

a rebellious guy, pulling pranks on the nurses and getting in trouble, but he was a gentleman whenever Satomi was around. He'd fetch chairs and do other favors, just to get a smile.

That day, Satomi sat down with me and pulled out a paper bag. "How have you been? Good?"

"Does it *look* like I've been good?"

I investigated the bag. I hadn't heard directly from my parents for years; we parted on bad terms, and people like Satomi had been doing messenger duty ever since.

"Want me to peel the apple?"

"I'll be fine," I said.

"If there's anything I can do for you . . ." Satomi hesitated. "Just ask."

There was a long pause. "Do you mind if I tell you what's happened at home over the past three years?"

I nodded mutely.

Three years ago, I eloped with my lover. I didn't see my parents or Satomi even once during those years, and it was only the accident that brought me back to them. For me to disappear and then reappear like this was a horrible burden to my parents. Somewhat to my surprise, I actually felt guilty about it.

Satomi told more or less the story I'd expected—that everyone was worried about me and wanted me to

come home. But I could hear the bitterness between the lines; my parents didn't want me back for my own sake, but because it was an embarrassment that their only heir had run off. They'd covered things up as best they could, but word was bound to leak out. Satomi didn't even hint at the resentment, but I knew they all thought of me with disdain.

I put up my hand. "I don't want to hear anymore." Sweat glistened on my face, and my arms shook uncontrollably.

Satomi looked worried. It made me think of my mother, who'd once said, "I'll find someone *suitable* for you to marry. Forget about this." My lover was standing right there, but my mother might as well have been speaking in front of the sofa. "Family background is important. Marrying someone like that isn't going to make you happy."

That was the day we eloped. I couldn't stand to see my lover cry. We spent three years together, living humbly but happily, until the accident ripped us apart again.

Eventually Satomi left. I opened the envelope she'd brought with her and read the letter from my parents. It was full of grief and condemnation, couched in kind phrases. *What kind of horrible child does this to a mother?* it said between the lines. As far



as they were concerned, the accident served me right for bringing shame on our house.

Feeling miserable, I put the letter back into the envelope. I tried not to care about what my parents thought, what society thought . . . I'd managed it for three years, but now that I'd fallen back into their orbit, I couldn't escape their scorn.

My little hospital room had three beds in a row, like caskets. Mine was closest to the window. I stared outside and thought about dying. Not a day passed since I'd arrived at the hospital that I didn't think about suicide. I planned to end my own life before I'd let my parents take it from me. The nurses didn't keep a close watch on the patients, and I had all the time in the world.

I pictured hanging myself, trying to imagine the sensation of dangling with nothing under my feet. I'd jumped into the ocean once, and the water had been deeper than I'd thought; I pictured the vertigo I might experience while I hanged would be similar. I didn't think I'd have a problem with killing myself. In fact, when I thought about it, I wanted to do it sooner rather than later.

The next bed over squeaked, and Haruki shuffled across the floor. "I'm gonna go take a leak," he said.

He had a bruise on his face from a recent fight with one of the male nurses. He'd found a cat out in

the yard, and he tried to adopt it. He got away with it for a few days, sneaking meals up from the cafeteria, but eventually the doctors found out and took it away from him. He took a swing at the nurse who came for it, and got bruised for his trouble.

My other roommate, in the bed nearest the door, was Nakagawa. He piped up as soon as Haruki left the room.

"Was that your friend?" he said. He sat up on his bed, smoking a cigar. Years of puffing away had made his voice harsh and gravelly.

"No," I said. "Just someone running errands for my parents."

Nakagawa was *nouveau riche*, chubby and round-faced, and fond of ostentatious clothes and jewelry. He hid smoking his cigars from the nurses, stubbing them out every time someone came by. It was clear from the smell what he'd been doing, but whenever anyone asked him about it he just laughed.

Normally the three of us never talked. When Haruki got into a fight with the staff, Nakagawa and I didn't intervene. Simply being around the two of them all day was annoying enough, and I'm sure they felt the same way about me. As soon as we were left alone together, the air became stale and stifling. Haruki

would fidget, and Nakagawa went for walks to escape the boredom.

Even when we did exchange words, I got the sense none of us listened to each other. Haruki was young and wild, and Nakagawa was old and rotund. I just tried to stay out of the way. We each had our burdens to bear. The silent room ate away at our spirits and solidified our fears.

We were never really at rest. Every so often, Haruki would punch the wall just to experience the sensation, and the nurses were never able to talk him out of it. I knew just how he felt.

I couldn't stand to be alone with Nakagawa, so I decided to go outside.

"You going for a walk?" he said as I got up.

"Yeah."

"Out by the forest, right?"

I nodded.

"You'd better take a good look while you can. I hear they're going to cut the trees down soon to make room for a new hospital wing."

Nakagawa was on good terms with a number of nurses, so he always had the latest information. I saw no reason not to believe him.

I went down the same path I'd walked yesterday. The sky was clear, but under the trees the forest floor

was in shadow. It was windy in the yard, but once I got into the forest it was calm; the trees made me forget I was outside. I felt like I was walking through a dream, but it wasn't a bad feeling. The intertwined branches created a soft silence, but it was different from the deathly quiet of the hospital room. There were no patients here, no caskets. It was peaceful.

I turned the corner to the clearing. The huge tree loomed as large as it had the day before. I sat down on its roots and rested quietly for a while. There were no sounds of insects, just the faint crackle of dry leaves beneath my feet when I shifted. If I didn't move, I felt like I'd disappeared.

Everyone—my family, society—had opposed my marriage to the person I loved. And now that person was dead. The entire world had rejected me. I heard the echo of my mother's voice . . . *Marrying someone like that isn't going to make you happy.*

And because of the accident, she was right. I was sure she was smiling. She always loved pointing out my mistakes.

The doctor told me I was just making myself out to be the victim. He said I thought about everything in a negative way, and that it was a bad tendency. He might have been right, I suppose. I felt guilty for troubling

my parents. I just wanted to live with my lover; I never meant anybody any harm.

I obsessed, dwelling on the same cycle of thoughts over and over, until the sheer repetition was like a lead weight in my skull. It grew and grew, fed by suffering and sadness, until I thought my head would burst. My ears rang, and my chest felt tight. Before I knew it, I was curled in a ball with my hands pressed to my forehead. My cheeks were wet with tears.

There was a tiny sound, a little ripple in the air, only audible because of the absolute stillness. It sounded almost like a girl yawning. It was the same sound I'd heard yesterday. I listened closely—not yawning, exactly, but a cheerful humming.

I uncurled and looked around for the source. There was no one else in the clearing, and the trees stood silent and still. The voice was so soft, I felt like it might vanish at any moment; it sounded as though it was right next to me, but I couldn't see.

Right beside me was the flower I had found yesterday. It had grown fuller since then, ready to bloom any day now. The same strand of hair, fuller and thicker now, hung down from between the petals. As I bent to examine it more closely, the sound got louder; I put my ear beside it, and I could hear a girl's humming coming from inside.

The bud moved, just slightly. It wasn't the wind—something inside the flower had shifted, making the whole plant tremble. I put out my hand and touched it gently. The flower was as warm as a woman's skin.

There's someone inside, I thought. And she's humming.



I went back to the hospital and found the gardener. He was an elderly man that the hospital employed to take care of the grounds. From time to time I'd see him from my window, but I'd never spoken to him before. I asked him if he had an extra planter, something I could keep a little flower in, and he suddenly sported a tan-wrinkled smile. After a few minutes of puttering in his little shack, he produced a small brown pot.

"Perfect," I said. "Thank you."

He nodded kindly. "Going to plant some flowers?"

"Yes."

He dusted off the planter with his hand. "What kind?"

I had no response, so I muttered something noncommittal and turned away. I took the planter back to the clearing and knelt beside the huge tree, near the singing flower.

For a moment, I hesitated. I felt like the flower really belonged in its natural environment, and I was worried I might damage it by digging it up. But Nakagawa had said the forest was going to be cut down and a new wing built on the land; he hadn't said when . . . so if I didn't rescue the flower now, it might be too late.

I wanted the flower, I realized. It was irrational, but I didn't want it to die. I didn't even want someone else to find it and take it away. I wanted to keep it with me.

I could still hear the strange melody when I put my head beside it. Dead leaves crunched under my feet. The whole landscape seemed dead, a carpet of brown and black from which the tiny, new, green shoot had sprung. It was a bright new life in an old, faded world.

I dug around the flower, taking care not to damage its roots. I did the whole thing by hand, since I didn't have a spade; thankfully, the soil there was soft and wet. Aside from the singing and the strange hairlike strands, the flower was a very normal plant, and I was able to move it into the planter without any trouble. I packed extra dirt around the roots.

While I worked, it kept humming. It would hum for a while, then stop to rest, and then start up again. It seemed content to repeat this all day long.

I took the pot back to my room and set it on the windowsill. My roommates were both there, but they didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. I debated telling them what I'd found, but I thought they wouldn't take it well; they might be afraid of it, or try to steal the strange plant. I decided not to say anything unless they noticed the humming.

For a while after I brought it to my room, the flower was silent, but once it had basked in the sun for a few minutes, it burst back into song. The humming was hard to hear at first, but before long it filled the entire room.

Haruki sat up in bed. "Do you hear someone singing?"

Nakagawa looked up briefly from his book. "So? Some girl outside is singing."

Haruki kept looking around, trying to find the source of the sound.

"If I told you," I said carefully, "that the sound was coming from a plant, what would you say?"

They both looked at me incredulously.

"I'd say you were crazy," Nakagawa mumbled, and went back to his book.

That night, the two of them were fast asleep. Moonlight shone in through the window and crept

across the floor. I was only pretending to sleep; I could hear the footsteps of a nurse getting closer, until she stopped outside our door. The beam of a flashlight flickered briefly while she confirmed that everything was normal, and then the footsteps went back the other way. After that—absolute silence, as quiet as a grave.

I turned to look at the flower. The windowsill was above the level of my bed, so I could see the plant silhouetted against the blue moonlight. It was silent, as though asleep. But as I watched, the flower moved. Just a tiny jerk, but the strands that dangled from the bud swayed from side to side. In total silence, the flower started to bloom. It happened little by little. I held my breath as I watched. I didn't want to miss a moment. It looked like a cicada, emerging from its chrysalis and spreading its wings for the first time.

Finally, when the petals had fully spread, I could see the center of the flower. Instead of a bud, there was a girl's face, about the size of my fingertip. Her neck merged from the stem.

I sat up for a closer look. The girl had pearly white skin, and indeed she had strands of jet-black hair. She was sleeping. Her eyes were closed. She was beautiful. Not a girl, really, but a woman. A mother with child. A



newborn. A wise, old crone. It seemed impossible to pin down, a face outside of time itself. Her expression was serene, and I swore I could hear the slight sound of her breathing.

TWO

In the morning, I awoke to the sound of the girl's humming and turned to the windowsill. Her eyelids were open—not fully, but a little. The eyes underneath didn't seem to move, as though she were still dreaming. Her lips were closed. When I put my finger out, I could feel her breath coming ever so softly from her tiny nose. For a moment, I wasn't sure if I'd really awoken or if I was still in a wonderfully peaceful dream.

I hid the planter under my bed, so my roommates and the nurses wouldn't find it. The girl kept humming, her little voice filling up the room.

"There's that singing again," said Nakagawa, scanning the room. "It's clearer than it was yesterday."

Haruki rubbed his sleepy eyes and listened. Eventually he turned to me. "It's coming from under your bed. Are you hiding a music box or something?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly."

"Then what is it?" Haruki asked.

"You'll freak out if I show you," I said.

"If you don't tell us, I'll tell the nurse."

Nakagawa stuck his head out into the hallway, then turned back to us. "The coast is clear for now, but you'd better hurry up."

I was a bit worried, but I knew I couldn't hide it from them forever. I took a deep breath and said, "In the forest, I found a flower with a girl's face in it. She's the one who's humming."

"Yeah, right," Haruki said. "Seriously, what have you got under there?"

I pulled the flowerpot out and presented it for their inspection. The flower was so tiny that they had to look closely to see the face. At first Nakagawa snorted in derision, but then I heard them both let out a gasp. My roommates could do nothing but stare while the dreaming girl kept up her humming. I worried that they'd scream, but thankfully neither did.

Nakagawa reached out a finger to brush against her face, but stopped short. "I feel like touching her would

be wrong," he said. His eyes were sparkling, as though he were looking at the finest gold jewelry.

"You . . . You weren't kidding," Haruki said. "We can't let the nurses find this. They'll take it away."

"I'd like to keep it secret a while longer," I said. "Don't tell anybody."

"I think we should let everyone know," Nakagawa said. "This could be a huge discovery!"

I shook my head. "Maybe later, but not yet."

After much argument, we agreed to keep things quiet. If the girl sang when a nurse came in, Haruki would hum along to cover it up. Nakagawa wasn't happy, but he didn't tell on us. He just kept trying to convince me to go public with the flower.

I let it sit in the sun on the windowsill whenever the nurses weren't around. I thought the girl looked happier that way; not that she actually smiled, or anything, but I could feel it.



Hospital beds have a way of making me think. When I lie back and stare at the ceiling, all sorts of memories and sensations wash over me, an overwhelming torrent. I'm not sure if it was my emotional state or

the hospital atmosphere, but I couldn't help dwelling on every difficult or sad thing I'd been through. I started from my childhood, reliving every mistake, and kept going until I remembered the train—a hell on Earth. By now, this was a normal part of hospital life for me. I'd gotten used to it.

All that changed after the arrival of the flower girl. With that soothing hum filling up the room, it didn't feel like a coffin. I could close my eyes and imagine that I was lying in a never-ending grass field, with fresh air blowing over me instead of the antiseptic hospital stench. I thought the girl poured her feelings out through the song; as if she were so happy with the sunlight on her leaves that she just had to sing.

If I watched her long enough, I could see her blink. Not much of a blink, since her eyes weren't fully open, but enough to prove that she was alive. She wasn't just a flower, not even a really strange one; she was a human being, with a life and feelings of her own. The humming was how she expressed them, and it bathed the grim, contaminated hospital with a warm, white light.

She seemed to know that she was sharing the room. I realized that when Haruki tried talking to her directly.

"Hey," he said, and she stopped humming. Her expression didn't change much, but somehow she gave

the impression that she was listening. I'm not sure she understood, but she seemed happy to be talked to, and afterward there was a subtle change in the tone of her song. Sounding hopeful, it washed away the despair that filled the room. It was like she had wrapped us all in gentle warmth and told us not to worry.

Haruki began to talk about the things he wanted to do when he was released. I suggested he write them down, and before long he had pages and pages of ideas. He smiled as if he'd never known how to smile before, and took to roaming the hallways, barefoot, a big grin on his face. We became friends instead of just roommates, and we actually talked to one another.

When the nurse came to take our temperature, I hid the flower while Haruki hummed. The pot fit neatly between the head of my bed and the wall. The flower swayed on its slender stem; even though her face was only the size of my fingertip, it seemed like the stem was barely strong enough to support it. I worried that she might break.

The nurse looked at Haruki suspiciously. I caught his eye and held a neutral expression until she left, and then the two of us burst out laughing.

Nakagawa quit smoking his cigars. He wouldn't say why, but I think it was out of consideration for the girl.

When he wasn't reading or chatting with the nurses, he would spend his time staring at her, squinting hard as though he were trying to look at the sun. He'd didn't talk to her like Haruki did, but she seemed to know he was there. I wondered if she could see, or if her leaves felt movements in the air.

After a few song-filled days, Satomi came to visit again with another paper bag filled with gifts. Haruki was out, so it was just me and Nakagawa in the room.

"You're looking better," Satomi said to me, and then smiled. The flower girl wasn't humming; I'd hidden her under the bed. I didn't think I could tell Satomi about her, so I said nothing.

"I've got another letter for you."

It was at the bottom of the paper bag. I opened it and recognized my mother's handwriting.

"They want me to come home," I said, reading. "I guess my mother wants to keep me nearby. She says being surrounded by nature would 'be better for my emotional healing.' " I laughed. "What do they want me at home for, anyway?"

"You're not planning to go home? Ever?"

I thought about it and shook my head.

After a long pause, Satomi said, "Your mother wants you to come home very much."

"Don't be ridiculous. You heard what she said about—" I broke off. "I felt every word of that."

"You didn't see her crying after you left." Satomi paused. "She's your *mother*. What mother never wants to see her child again?"

I felt a dull pain in my head. Satomi's words wounded me, but I shook my head firmly.

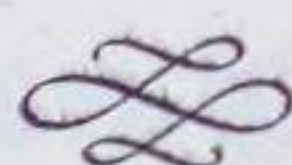
"I'm not going back." Going back, asking for my parents' forgiveness, that would be like admitting that leaving had been wrong. And that would mean betraying the one I loved.

Satomi's face clouded. "Your mother has always been kind to me. All I want is for the two of you to make peace." Satomi sighed. "Do you still dream about the accident?"

"Not recently," I said.

"It's hard . . . to be the one who's spared."

Just at that moment, the humming started from under my bed. Satomi stopped and looked around, not sure where the music was coming from. Nakagawa, who'd been sitting and quietly reading his book, started humming. I'd never heard anything so off-pitch. Satomi turned to him, and he smiled, showing his gold teeth. He kept smiling and humming until Satomi left. Finally, the door closed and we were alone with the flower girl.



I never got bored, staring at the girl. The three of us watered her and gave her sunlight. We looked for the flower in the encyclopedia and found nothing. Haruki claimed the petals resembled a foreign plant, but the girl was clearly Japanese.

The little song she hummed was always the same. It had a simple, sweet melody, easy to remember, almost like a lullaby. We wondered where she'd learned it; Nakagawa said it was probably something innate to her, just like a flower's color or shape.

"I wonder if she'll ever talk," Haruki said. None of us knew the answer.

One night, after lights out, I lay in bed listening to the silence of the hospital. The nurses scolded anyone who stayed awake, so there was nothing but the quiet sounds of people shifting in bed.

I couldn't sleep. Satomi's last visit haunted me; I could see the letter when I closed my eyes. It reminded me of a time from my childhood—the day my mother threw away my fishing rod. It was old and worn out, but I'd caught a lot of fish with it, and it was important to me. I caught her trying to get rid of it.

"It's dangerous," she said unapologetically.

The next day, I decided I would get revenge. I was going to throw away the most important thing she had. First, I had to find out what that was. Feigning innocence, I asked her.

"You, of course," she said.

My need for revenge vanished at once. I felt loved. The current state of our relationship must have been awful for her, and it hurt me to inflict such pain, but I couldn't get past my resentment. I didn't know what to do; I wanted to make peace, but I was so worried that if we met we'd just erupt into screams and fighting and damage each other irreparably.

On top of that, what could I say to her after what I'd done?

In the dark, Nakagawa's bed squeaked. I heard him call my name, in a whisper.

"Yes?" I whispered back.

"Ah, you are awake. I can't sleep either. Have a drink with me."

He pulled a little bottle from its hiding place under his bed. I decided I needed a break from thinking of my mother, so I took him up on it. I shifted in my bed a little, so we could sit together and look out the window. We sat side-by-side, sipping from our mugs and looking at the flower girl.

After a moment, Haruki woke up.

"Drinking?" He rolled his eyes, but held out his mug for a taste. Nakagawa and I laughed.

The only light came from the moon. The flower seemed to glow white as the tiny girl slept. Her hair, finer than silk, lay in a curtain across her face. We sat in silence and watched the shadows of the clouds move across her. Time passed, unnoticed.

I saw tears glisten on Nakagawa's cheek. I didn't know why he was crying, and I didn't ask. Everyone in the hospital had something awful in their past.

THREE

There was a nurse at the hospital named Aihara. She was stout and cheerful; she was fairly new to the staff on our floor, but she'd already taken over a lot of work. Reception and laundry, office work and filing—practically everything. She had rosy cheeks and a loud laugh.

Nakagawa liked her. He would talk to her at the reception desk every chance he got, and follow her around the hospital when she was on duty. Sometimes he got in the way of her work, and one of the other nurses would glare at him.

One day, when Nakagawa and I were talking in the hall, Aihara passed by with a baby in her arms.

“Whose baby is that?” Nakagawa asked.

The nurse spoke quietly, so as not to wake the infant. "Her mommy is upstairs."

I bent closer to look at the little boy's face. He had a button nose and fuzz for hair, and his eyes were screwed up in sleep.

We chatted for a bit, and then Aihara went to leave.

"Can I hold the baby?" Nakagawa asked. "Just once."

The nurse hesitated, but handed him the child. Nakagawa held him with surprising gentleness, rocking him slowly. Almost instinctively, he started to hum the gentle lullaby of the flower girl.

"That song . . ." Aihara looked surprised. "How do you know that song?"

Nakagawa and I looked at each other. "You know it?"

She put her hand to her mouth, as though she'd said something she shouldn't have, and nodded.

"There was a patient here," the nurse said, "who hummed that song all the time. Misaki Karatani. She was here about a month ago, and I was assigned to take care of her, so I saw her all the time. We used to walk together, out to the big tree in the forest clearing, and she sat and hummed that song."

"What happened to her?" I asked, perhaps a little too quickly.

"She died," Aihara said and looked away. The baby began to fidget in Nakagawa's arms, and the nurse took him back and walked away.

That night, Aihara was on hallway patrol. We waited for her to come to our room with her flashlight. It was after lights out, so the room was dark, and the flower was asleep. Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and when the door opened I was blinded for a moment by her flashlight.

"What are you still doing up?" Aihara asked, annoyed. Her expression shifted when she saw our faces. "What's wrong?"

"Tell us more about Misaki Karatani," Nakagawa said.

"Wh-what? Why?"

"We need to know," I said.

She shook her head. "I'm not allowed to talk about other patients. Stop your snooping and go to sleep." Angry, Aihara turned to leave, but I grabbed her arm.

"It's not just snooping," I said. "We *really* need to know."

The nurse bit her lower lip and flashed the light around the room, trying to judge our sincerity. Finally, she let the door close. Then she collapsed onto one of the chairs.

“My goodness,” she said. “Why her?” Her voice sounded strained. I could see tears in her eyes. “I’ll tell you,” she said. “I’m not supposed to, but I don’t see what it can hurt. Maybe you can mourn her with me.”

We listened intently as she told the story. The nurse had become friends with Misaki soon after she was admitted.

Misaki was a petite, pretty girl who walked through the world as though in some kind of constant dream. She would gaze for hours at a puddle, smiling and frowning—and she hummed constantly.

“She was always *experiencing* the world,” Aihara said. “She’d put her cheek against the cold stone wall and say it felt good, or she’d sway back and forth with the trees in the wind. When she saw a little, green seedling, she told me she wanted to be a flower.”

Misaki Karatani. I repeated the name in my mind. My heart raced.



“Look,” Misaki said to Aihara, sitting in the flowerbed outside the hospital. “Don’t you think the kanji for ‘death’ looks like the one for ‘flower’?” She drew the characters in the dirt.

Aihara said nothing. She was used to Misaki's strange thoughts.

"If you could be reincarnated," the girl asked, "what would you want to be?"

"I'd like to be a human again, I think," the nurse said.

"I see." Misaki looked longingly at the little white flowers. "I was thinking how nice it would be if I could just erase myself. I'd never want to be human again."

"Why not?"

Misaki sighed. "It's too hard. I feel so guilty for putting my mother through this. I'm angry at myself for being alive."

"Misaki," the nurse said gently, "you're depressed. I know you feel that way now, but it's not real."

"Listen to me, Aihara. It was always just me and my mom. My dad was a very rich man, but he already had a wife. You understand?" She lowered her eyes. "Mom moved into a house up in the mountains when she was pregnant with me."

Misaki sat down on one of the stone benches and swung her feet. She stared off at the blue mountains in the distance.

"When I was little," she said, "I heard someone say that if I hadn't been born, my mom could have married someone else and been happy. No one would have

found out about her and my dad, and he would never have gotten in trouble. My mom never talked about it, but all that happened because of me . . .”

Aihara listened silently.

“When I was ten, my mother died. My uncle adopted me, but he never liked me. He thought I was a burden.” She sighed. “I loved his house—it was big, with beautiful lilies in the yard—but everyone there hated me. I was the intruder, butting in on their lives. I don’t blame them.”

“Do you want to walk for a while?” Aihara asked.

Misaki nodded. They left the flowerbed behind and started into the forest while the girl continued her story.

“There was a boy who lived at my uncle’s house, one of his kids. He was kind of a crybaby, and his sister was always teasing him, but he was a really nice boy. He played the piano, watered the plants, and sat with me when I cried. I was a crybaby, too. We’d take turns writing poetry and then trying to compose music. I wrote a song like this.”

She hummed while walking and the song echoed in the forest.

“What happened to your cousin?” Aihara asked.

“Hm?” Misaki pretended she didn’t hear the question, but her eyes were filled with sadness. “When

I was eighteen I left my uncle's house. I rented a room in town for a few months, but I ended up here at the hospital before long."

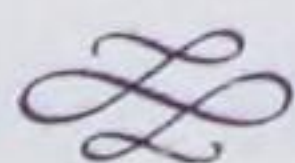
She'd gotten a visitor about a month before, Aihara knew. The nurse had thought it strange, since no one had ever visited Misaki before. It had been a young man, and they'd talked for a long time. She mentioned it to Misaki.

"Was he . . . ?"

The girl nodded, mumbling to herself. "Ryuichiro Mikami. That's his name. Such a strong name, for such a crybaby . . ." She looked up at Aihara and shook her head.

After that, all the nurse's words were ignored. Misaki sat by herself, shaking her head, not speaking to anyone. Eventually they moved her back to her room, and she lay in bed for three days.

On the fourth day, as Aihara walked their old route through the forest, she passed by the huge tree and found the girl hanging from one of the branches, a red scarf wrapped around her neck. Dead leaves whispered through the gap between her feet and the ground.



The place where she died, I thought, is where the flower girl grew. I suddenly understood why Aihara had given me a funny look when she found me sitting beneath that tree.

"The young man came back to take the body away," Aihara said. "He told me his name was Ryuichiro Mikami. I wanted to strap him to a chair and find out what he'd done to her, but he looked so sad that I just couldn't do it."

I was silent.

Aihara sighed. "I remember the last time thing she told me before she killed herself. 'I said I didn't want to be reborn as a person,' she'd said, 'but I'm still glad I was born in the first place. Isn't that strange? My mother wanted me to be born. She told me so, even when I was still in her belly.' She looked so happy when she said that. I never thought . . ."

It was obviously painful for Aihara to talk about, and it was getting harder for me to listen. I wondered what cruel fate had driven the girl to choose death. *It was her spirit, I thought, that bore a flower in the place where her life had ended.*

After that day, we started to call the flower girl Misaki. Once Aihara was gone, the three of us sat around and stared at her.

"It would be nice to take her home," Haruki said, sighing.

"Don't be silly," Nakagawa said. "If we up and leave the hospital, they'll just send the cops after us."

Misaki sang on, oblivious. There was something sad about the tune, now—like the feeling of longing for someone. The flower girl was red in the setting sun, her eyes half open; she looked like she was grieving. Her voice was thin, quivering like a reed. The sun painted the room red as well, and the three of us closed our eyes and listened.

She was definitely changing. By the next day, it was easy to see: her healthy green leaves had started to turn yellow, and her face looked sunken and hollow. I thought it might be a disease, so I tracked down the hospital gardener and described the symptoms. He told me it was natural—flowers, after all, have a set lifespan. They bud, bloom, and eventually die. It wasn't that her face was unhealthy, just old; she'd had the face of a baby when the flower first opened.

Misaki grew weaker by the day. I watered her, gave her sunlight, and put her in a gentle breeze, but she wasn't getting better. Her thin stem was weak and bent under the flower's weight. My roommates and I

didn't talk about her any more; we could only watch her wither away.

One morning, I noticed one of the petals had fallen. We picked it up and wrapped it carefully in paper. Haruki wanted to keep it.

The next day, Satomi stopped by with a message. Misaki sang less and less as she got weaker, so there was no need for one of us to hum over her any more. I shifted her carefully to her hiding place beneath my bed, making sure nothing pressed on the weakened stem.

Satomi had no paper bag this time, just the message. The same kind of envelope with the same handwriting. It was from my parents, of course.

"I'll pick you up in three days," Satomi said. "Your parents have arranged for a car."

I read the letter. They were half asking, half forcing me to come home. What I wanted was irrelevant. The hospital would release me into Satomi's care.

"Can't you wait?" I said. "Just a while?"

I didn't want to part with Nakagawa, Haruki, or Misaki. I knew I would have to leave the flower behind when I went—I couldn't take it from my roommates—but I felt like I still needed to hear her song.

Satomi sighed. "I'll be back in three days. Make sure you're packed."

Haruki and Nakagawa turned their eyes to me once Satomi had gone. I could feel their silent question, and I got up and left the room without answering. I drifted downstairs and out the front doors, into the hospital yard.

It was already dark outside. I found myself walking the forest path toward the clearing where I'd found Misaki. I could barely see my feet—I kept tripping over roots. My thoughts whirled.

Misaki was going to die eventually, like all flowers. It was time to say goodbye.

The white tree was waiting for me, as quiet as the grave. I sat on its roots and hid my face in my hands, thinking of the girl who'd ended her life here. We'd both lived under the same roof and dreamed about dying. Living was harder. I wondered what she'd thought about, before she became a flower, and what kind of man Mikami had been.

What I understood, though, was the grief Misaki had carried. Thoughts of death had haunted her. I'd been thinking along the same lines when I'd come here for the first time, but then I'd heard her beautiful, sad song.

My heart called out to her. *Why did you become a flower?* I thought. *Why did you sing? What do you regret?*

The flower girl wouldn't answer my questions; with her rebirth, her memory of words had gone, and only her song remained.

I thought of my lover and my unborn child, both lost in the accident. Our future could have been beautiful, or it could have been harsh. Either way, though, I'd wanted to share it with the ones I loved. Instead, I was the only one left, and the tiny life I'd built for myself had been blown away. It felt like a cruel trick.

What's left for me? I thought. What's left, except the ridicule of my family and friends? How can I live if they make me go back home to face all the people I'd caused so much pain?

Death would be a sweet release. Misaki had chosen death; it was a sad decision, but maybe for her it had been the right one. I was thinking too much again, and my head felt like it was full of hot lead, heavy and burning. I could feel the heat throbbing down my neck. If only my skull wasn't in the way, I could get rid of the weight.

Shooting myself in the head would be a relief. Just point and shoot, no more weight.

Someone had even instructed me on how to do it, long ago . . . "Don't point the gun at your temple. There's a margin for error. If you really want to die, put the gun in your mouth."

I wouldn't do it that way, I thought. The lead would be inside my skull, not in my throat. I didn't want to die; I just wanted to get rid of the weight. I needed relief.

I wished someone had handed me a gun, right then. Despair gripped me with cold hands. My nails dug into my scalp, then raked tracks through my hair.

I startled at the feeling of a hand on my arm. I looked up to see Haruki. Nakagawa stood beside him, a flashlight in hand. They stared at me with accusing eyes.

"You were out for a while," he said, "so we came looking for you." He was on the verge of tears.

"We want you to take Misaki with you," Nakagawa said. I looked up at them, confused.

"We talked it over," he continued. "We want you to take her back to her home. We can't leave the hospital, but now you can."

I paused. It might be possible. I'd never even thought about it; the idea of being free hadn't sunk in yet.

I decided to postpone my suicide for a while. I'll take her, I thought. Before she faces death for a second time, I'll plant her where she belongs.

It was the last thing I needed to do.



The day I was to leave, I made sure to have everything prepared. It would be a long drive, but we weren't going to stop on the way. Satomi said I could sleep in the car.

I packed up my few possessions. My tiny room, always so stuffy, suddenly felt like a tomb.

Haruki looked at my empty bed and said, "I'll get a better breeze now." He sniffed.

Satomi didn't show up until that evening. A black car with a uniformed driver pulled into the roundabout at the front of the hospital. My two roommates and Aihara saw me out. The sun had already set, and the hospital was a dark shadow behind us.

"This is for you," Nakagawa said. He handed me the flowerpot, with white wrapping paper covering the flower. "It's a present."

Satomi looked at me curiously, then shrugged and opened the car door. "Let's go."

I said goodbye to my three friends. I kept it short, and left dry-eyed.

The car pulled away. Satomi sat next to me, and I cradled the flowerpot in my arms. As we left, I looked back at the hospital and found the window I'd stared out of for so long. It still looked like a coffin; the whole building was a box full of coffins, filled with sad people

sitting in the darkness, lonely. I was glad when we rounded the bend and it passed out of sight.

I peeked under the white paper at the flower; the stem swayed back and forth with the motion of the car, which made me worry. It was so weak. Anything could break it. Misaki barely sang anymore—the only sound was the hum of the engine.

“Thank you,” Satomi said, “for not making a scene. You were so angry before.”

“You sound like my mother,” I said.

The driver remained silent. We passed by a mountain studded with little villages. The houses were lit up. After a while, we entered a dense forest and passed by a line of apple trees.

I thought about the map that my roommates had stolen for me before I’d left the hospital. There were some train tracks up ahead; that was the place we had to turn to get to Misaki’s home. Aihara had given me directions, which I’d written down and stuffed into my breast pocket. By now I had them memorized.

“Can we make a stop?” I asked. “One of the people I knew at the hospital lives up this mountain.”

“No,” Satomi said shortly.

“I can’t just leave without saying goodbye,” I said.

"I'm sorry. Your parents explicitly said we were couldn't make any stops."

I leaned forward to speak directly to the driver.

"Turn here, please!" I was surprised at how loud I spoke. He looked at me in the rearview mirror, obviously flustered.

"Don't stop," Satomi said. "The doctors said there would be some confusion this soon after being released."

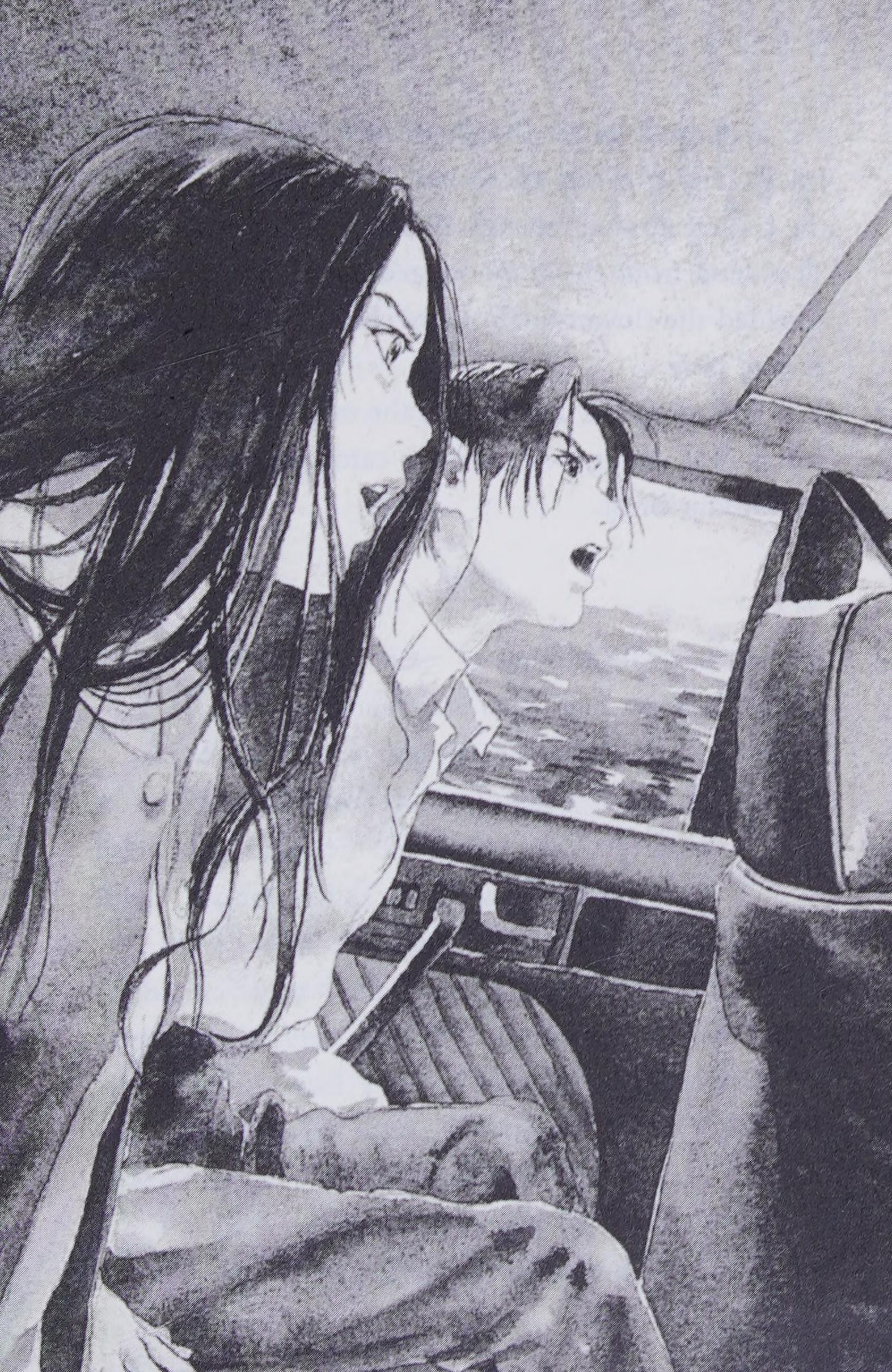
I felt anger bubbling up inside me. Those were my parents' words coming out of Satomi's mouth. The driver pretended not to hear a word I said thereafter, and the road curved away from the mountain and down toward the city.

The car lurched to a halt. The train tracks were in front of us, and the lights flashed as the guardrails came down. I could hear the train approaching.

I glanced down at the flowerpot. Misaki looked famished. Her cheeks were hollow, and there were dark circles under her eyes. She had slipped into a deep sleep. I looked back up, filled with sudden resolve.

It's now or never, I thought.

I opened the car door and ran, carrying the flowerpot with me. Satomi made a grab for me and missed; I heard the other door slam as I raced away.



I ducked under the guardrails, raced across the tracks, and got out the other side a moment before the train slammed through the space I'd just occupied. The wind from the train tugged at my clothes, and I shielded the flower against my chest. Flickering lights rushed past.

Satomi pulled up short on the other side, unable to cross; after taking a moment to catch my breath, I ran toward the forest.

FOUR

I followed the map toward Misaki's house. The forest was dense and dark, so I walked carefully to avoid dropping the flowerpot. A thin crescent moon peeked through the branches, and by its faint light I checked on the flower girl. Her stem was still intact, though her face was as haggard as ever.

My shoes and clothing were not meant for hiking through a forest. I almost stumbled many times, and my arms were covered with little cuts from branches. Satomi wasn't on my trail. I would have heard something, so I figured I was safe. I found my way out of the wood, back to the road, and started making better time.

I walked for hours. Every step caused the weak stem to swing, so I moved as slowly and as smoothly as I could.

The night air was chilly, and my cuts stung. It felt like the walk took forever; my legs became heavy and my breath grew short. There was no sign of my goal. I worried that I'd remembered the map incorrectly—that I'd keep heading the wrong way until I collapsed from fatigue.

But when I thought of Misaki, the pain and fatigue disappeared. If I had taken the wrong road, I'd just have to go back and find another. I wanted her to see this—the landscape she'd grown up with—one last time. It was a strange feeling. I began to think that this was my purpose, the reason I'd been put on Earth.

Finally, I came to an elementary school that had been marked on the map. I thought for a moment, then started up the mountain. The houses on either side of the road were packed more tightly together as I got closer to the village.

By the time sunlight peeked over the shoulder of the mountain, I found the little cluster of houses where Misaki had grown up. It was hard to believe that anyone actually lived there. Most of the buildings looked like they were abandoned, half covered in trees and vines. Farming tools were everywhere, like a scene out of another century.

I was relieved to come upon a few old women on their way to work in the fields. They had towels around

their heads and hoes in their hands, and they smiled warmly at me as they passed. I didn't think they got many visitors up here.

The map was accurate. I climbed a set of stone stairs and passed a monument, then turned onto the side street that led to Misaki's house. It wasn't even a street, just a dirt path with weeds growing beside it. A row of trees provided shade from the morning sun. It reminded me of the little path through the forest at the hospital because it also ended in a clearing.

I stood by a little dent in the side of the mountain—a tiny plateau on which someone had build a small house. It was modest but sturdy; I was relieved to see that it still stood. I'd finally reached Misaki's childhood home. There were no trees lining the edge of the flat space, and it felt like I'd walked out of the forest and into the sky. From the edge, I could see the town sprawled out below.

Smoke came out of the chimney. *Someone lives here*, I thought. That made me nervous—it could have been new tenants. I hadn't planned on that. After thinking for a while, I knocked on the door.

A young man answered. I'd never seen him before, but he looked somehow familiar; in his face, I saw an echo of the patients at the hospital—that sad, pointless

despair. He seemed surprised to see me, and I was somehow certain that he never had any visitors.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I'm the friend of a girl who used to live here," I said. "Misaki Karatani."

He looked at me suspiciously. "Misaki didn't have any friends."

"Did you know her?" I asked eagerly.

He nodded. "My name is Ryuichiro Mikami."

My heart raced. This was Misaki's young man, the one that led her to such agony. He looked as though he'd been alone and in pain for a long time; his cheeks were sunken, and his eyes were deep-set and bloodshot. I wanted to explain that I'd brought Misaki back to him, reborn, but I couldn't think of an easy way to spring it on him.

"I'm glad to meet you," I said. "Misaki talked about you a lot. We became very close while we were in the hospital." I looked around. "I'd love to talk to you, but there's something I have to do." I had to show Misaki the view. After that, I could take my time.

The young man stood, puzzled, as I walked toward the edge of the plateau. It was a sheer cliff, with a dizzying drop to the mountainside below. It felt like I could see forever, out to the ocean and the horizon. I

felt a faint tingle in my palms and the instinctive fear of slipping out into thin air.

I set the flowerpot down and tore off the wrapping paper, then started digging. I had no tools, but that didn't bother me; I excavated a little hole with my bare hands. Ever so slowly, I eased Misaki out of her pot and planted her in the earth.

The night's walk had taken its toll, and all the petals had fallen from the flower. The girl's face was bare and exposed at the end of the stem, and her eyes were closed. I patted some soil over her roots and sat back to look once again at the view. It was strange, knowing that ten years earlier Misaki had stood here with her mother. Then, she was happy, living a child's life . . . as simple as a blooming flower.

She must have wanted to come back here, I thought. Down in her uncle's house, where she knew no one, the memories of this place had probably been her only haven. I imagined her staring out the window, looking up at the mountain, and thinking of the quiet days with her mother.

I stood up and took a deep breath. My work was done, and I felt like a heavy weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"I've been looking for you."

It was Satomi.

I turned around. Mikami was there too, walking toward me. Satomi looked more worried than angry. She had a piece of paper in one hand; I recognized the map Aihara had drawn, which I realized must have fallen from my pocket during my escape.

Satomi reached for me. I suddenly remembered I was being dragged home by force, and my heart felt cold.

"Just a minute," I said. "I need to talk to him."

"Your parents are waiting," Satomi said.

"It won't take long."

"You've already wasted enough time! You're just planning another escape."

There was an escape right here, of a sort. A rapid descent into a spectacular view. I'd accomplished my purpose, after all.

After pausing for an apologetic bow to the young man, Satomi said, "I'm sorry to have disturbed you. We'll be leaving now." Then Satomi grabbed me by the arm and started dragging me back down the path.

Mikami looked at me oddly. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I brought Misaki back," I said. I no longer cared who knew about it, or what they thought.

Mikami looked confused, and Satomi paused for a moment. I took advantage of this hesitation and twisted free, running toward the edge of the cliff. The edge approached, the sky grew larger, and I could see my escape looming before me. A few moments longer, and my suffering would be at an end.

At the last moment, I glanced down at the flower. Misaki's eyes were wide open. I pulled up short, and Satomi and Mikami grabbed me from behind and dragged me back from the brink. There was a moment of screaming and wrestling, and then the two of them had me pinned to the dirt.

Satomi panted with the effort.

There was a pause, and then we all heard the song. I stopped fighting them. The flower was humming!

Satomi and Mikami followed my eyes and saw it for the first time. The tiny, soft voice that had filled the hospital room was once again raised in song.

The two of them let go of me and got up. I stepped forward and knelt by Misaki's side. Her eyes were wide open. They were as beautiful as pearls, taking in the vast landscape that lay before her.



Mikami invited me into Misaki's house. It was more like a cave than a home, tiny and wooden. There was only one room and it had almost no furniture. He left the door open so we could see the yard and the tiny flower on the edge of the cliff.

Satomi had agreed to wait for me by the car. The sight of a flower with a girl's face had been a shock. I'd promised to explain later. Left alone with Mikami, I tried to think of a good place to start. The silence grew more and more uncomfortable.

"Misaki and I composed that song," he said finally.

"Then you're her cousin," I said.

He nodded. "Distant cousin. She came to live with us when she was eleven." He smiled sadly, and I suddenly understood—they'd been lovers. *Then why was she by herself for so long?* I thought. *Why didn't anyone ever visit?*

"Time passed," he said, "and we became adults. My father arranged a marriage for me."

"Your parents didn't want you to marry Misaki," I said. That pain I understood; it hit close to home.

"Misaki was against it, too. She said she didn't belong in this world, no matter how I tried to convince her that she was loved. She'd heard too many awful

things said about her and her mother. All she wanted was to live a quiet life that didn't bother anyone."

I shifted uncomfortably.

"My parents were pressuring me to get married," Mikami went on. "Misaki said she was sorry for making that decision harder. Pretty soon after that, she just disappeared. We found out later that she'd spent a few months in town and then ended up at your hospital."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I gave up on her. I tried very hard to forget about her. It was in the best interests of my family." He sighed. "I tracked her down eventually, though. I couldn't help it."

"You visited the hospital." My heart felt like a stone.

He nodded. "Misaki told me about this place, so I started searching here. Someone told me there was a woman by her name in the hospital. I couldn't bear it any longer; I told my wife and family goodbye and went looking for her."

History repeats itself.

"When I saw her," he said, "I told her I'd left my wife and I asked her to marry me."

Mikami hadn't been able to bear being away from Misaki, so he'd thrown his life away in one grand

romantic gesture. But he hadn't realized what it would do to her. His love was like a spear through her heart; just like her own mother, Misaki felt like she'd broken up a family.

No wonder she thought she had to kill herself.

Mikami understood now. He bowed his head. "I'd heard about her mother and her circumstances, but I didn't really think. I killed her with my careless talk." His eyes grew dark.

"It's not your fault." It was the only thing I could think of to say. "She always talked about her mother. That's why I'm here now, I think. This was the only place she ever felt at rest."

I pictured Misaki humming to herself, out in the forest behind the hospital. I wondered if she'd thought about her mother and Mikami then.

Now it was my turn to explain. I told him the story of the flower: how I'd found it where she'd hung herself, the singing, and the people whose souls she had touched. Mikami stared out into the yard while I talked, looking at the flower girl. For a moment, I thought I saw the ghosts of a mother and child, but they were gone before I could blink.

Afterward, I felt overcome with fatigue. I drew a deep breath of cool mountain air. Mikami stood up and

walked over to the dresser—one of the only pieces of furniture he had.

“Misaki didn’t leave much behind,” he said. “I want you to have this. If you don’t want it, please just throw it away.”

He handed me a neatly folded piece of paper. I looked up at him, then opened it. It felt old and brittle, and the edges were turning yellow. It was covered in Misaki’s handwriting . . . a list of scribbled names. Just first names, not last names. I suddenly understood. She’d been brainstorming about names for a coming child.

The paper had been folded over and over until it was full of wrinkles. I could barely look at it. I was confused. She’d felt that she shouldn’t live on, wanted to disappear, but she wanted to give her child a name.

“That was the reason she left,” Mikami said quietly.

I nodded. Her stomach must have been showing by the time she hanged herself.

I stood up and walked out of the house. The two of us stood at the edge of the yard, listening to her soft voice. Her humming filled the little clearing. We walked over and sat down next to the singing plant. I tore my gaze away from them and looked down at the piece of paper in my hand.

I had a sudden memory of Haruki, running down the hallway with his arms spread, trailing his fingers along both walls. *We're all like that*, I thought, *walking the line between light and darkness*. The darkness of despair tugs at one arm, and the white light of hope pulls on the other. Sometimes, like Misaki, we lose our footing and tumble into the darkness. Suffering builds up and weighs us down, until nothing else matters.

I made my way down the mountain with a heavy heart. Halfway there, Mikami called out to me and hurried to catch up.

"Is something wrong?" I said.

He shook his head. "I just looked closely at the flower. It . . . it's not Misaki. It looks like her, but not quite."

I blinked, surprised. After a moment the explanation hit me. The singing flower wasn't Misaki, but her *child*—the child she'd wanted to be happy. Now that I knew, I could see the resemblance in Mikami's face as well; the girl in the flower was his daughter.

Misaki had sung her song to the child she'd carried, and the baby had heard it in her dreams. As a flower, she knew the melody but not the words.

Misaki, I thought, *wanted to give birth to a life even as she ended her own. She wanted to become a mother and be*



good to her daughter, as her own mother had been good to her. She wanted to show her child this beautiful world. And, on the edge of this life, her wish was granted. Her child sang, felt the warmth of the sun, and swayed in the wind—all in perfect innocence.

The song had passed between a mother in despair to the child in her womb. That bond could never be broken.

As the sun rose, I could hear the girl singing in the only language her mother had taught her. I said my farewells to Mikami and left Misaki's house, still clutching the wrinkled piece of paper she had left behind.

EPILOGUE

When I got to the bottom of the path, the black car was waiting.

Satomi stood next to it, looking relieved. I walked up to the car and leaned against it to rest for a while.

When we were young, we used to walk in the mountains. I remember them vividly—the grass up to our hips, the smell of weeds in the summer sun, leaves stuck to our sweaty skin. Back then, I used to laugh from the bottom of my heart.

“A long time ago,” I said, “my mother told me that I was the most important thing in the world to her.”

Satomi looked me in the eyes. “Your mother loves you.”

I nodded. "I know. That's what makes it so hard for me. No matter how angry I get with her, I remember what she said and I can't speak a word."

We got in the car, and the driver pulled away.

"Now that I can't have children," I said, "what does my mother want of me?"

Satomi looked at me with pained eyes. "She doesn't want anything. She's just worried about you."

The accident took away the two people I loved: the man I had cared for more than anything, and the child I had carried in my womb. When the doctor told me I could never bear another baby, all my hopes were taken away. Utter despair set in, and just living itself was painful. I'd hated the entire world.

How many times, I wondered, had the girl's voice saved me and the others from the darkness? Haruki and Nakagawa, my mismatched roommates, were men who were just like me—barren—unable to have children, and therefore in despair. It was only natural that the three of us, like a surrogate family, came to love Misaki's child so much.

I looked out the window at the light filtering through the passing trees. At times it was blinding, and whenever my vision washed out in brilliant white, I could see Misaki and my mother.

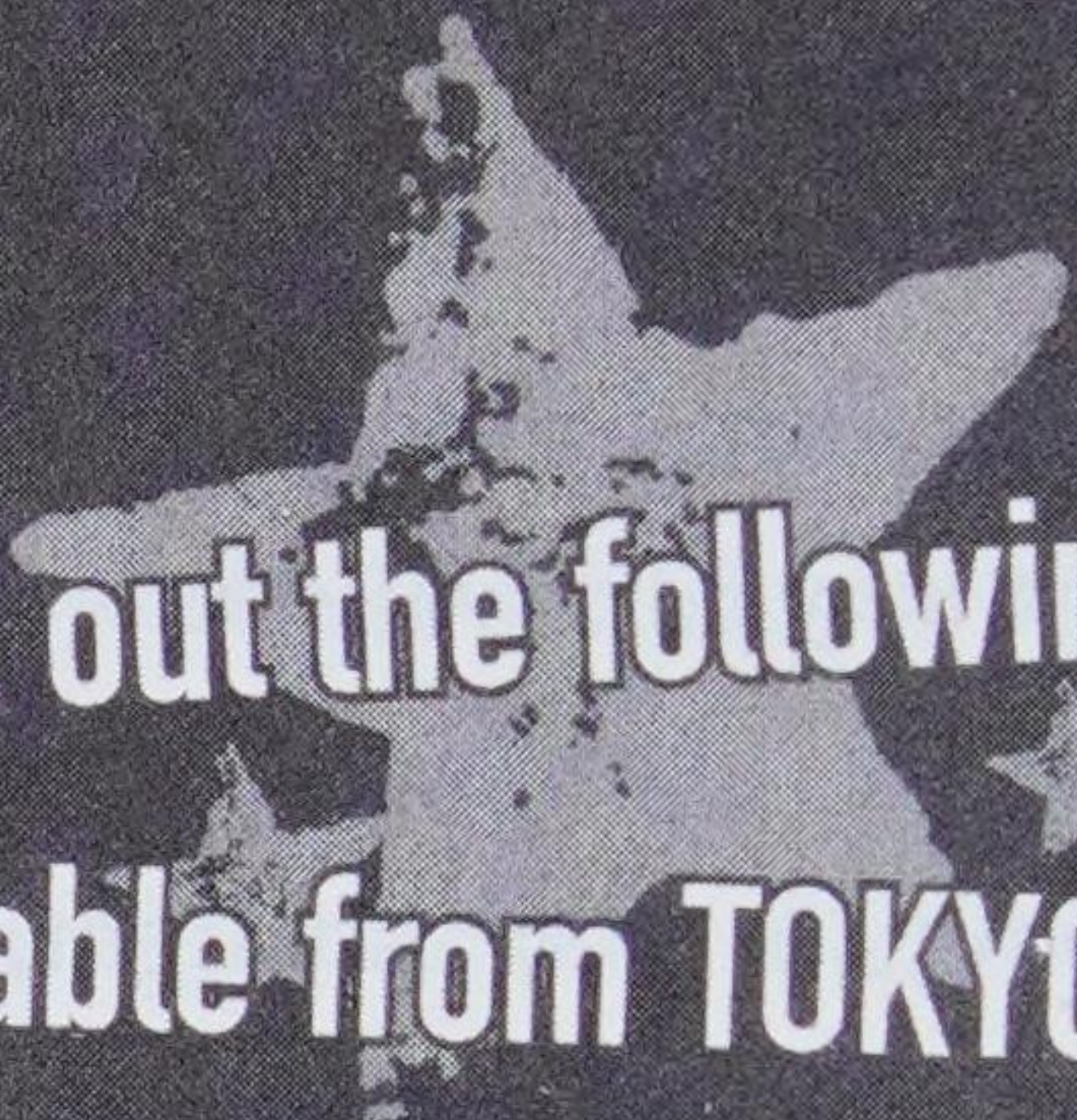
I have to talk to her, I thought. Things won't work out right away, and it may be a while before we can forgive each other, but I have to see her anyway.

It's one thing to rebel, to fight, to run away, but the bond between a mother and daughter would always remain. I was grateful to her for giving birth to me, raising me, and my only mistake was thinking of that as a burden.

I'd walked all night with Misaki's daughter in my arms. I remembered the mysterious strength I'd felt, the pain and the power that had seen me through it. I'd done my best for her, as a mother would for a child. I hoped it had been enough.

Before I knew it, I was sobbing. I put my hand on the window and felt the warmth of the sun.

To be born into the world is painful, but the world is full of light.



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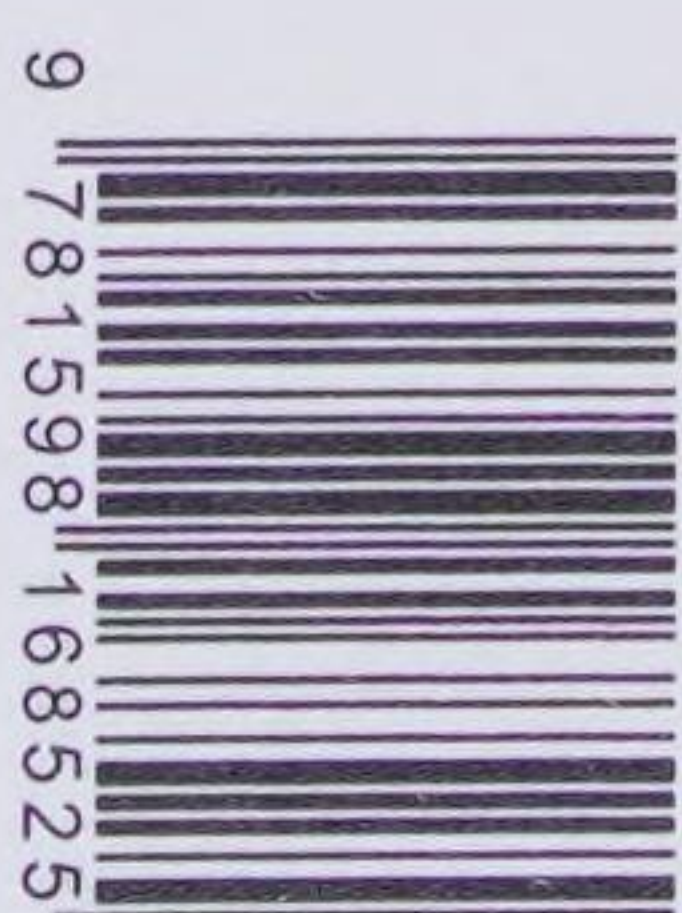
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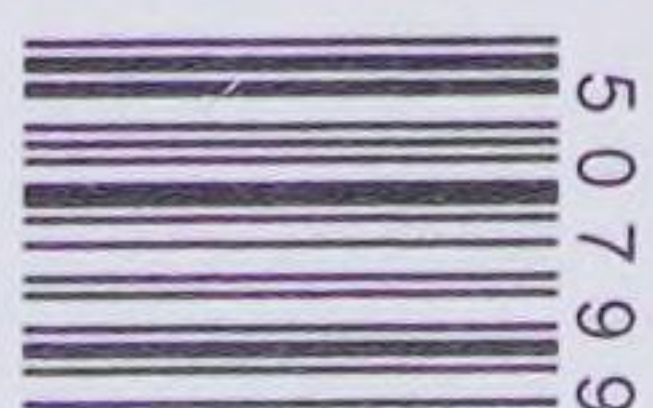


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